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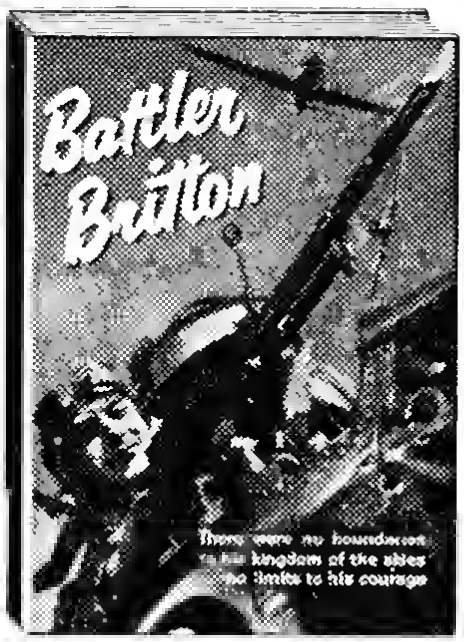

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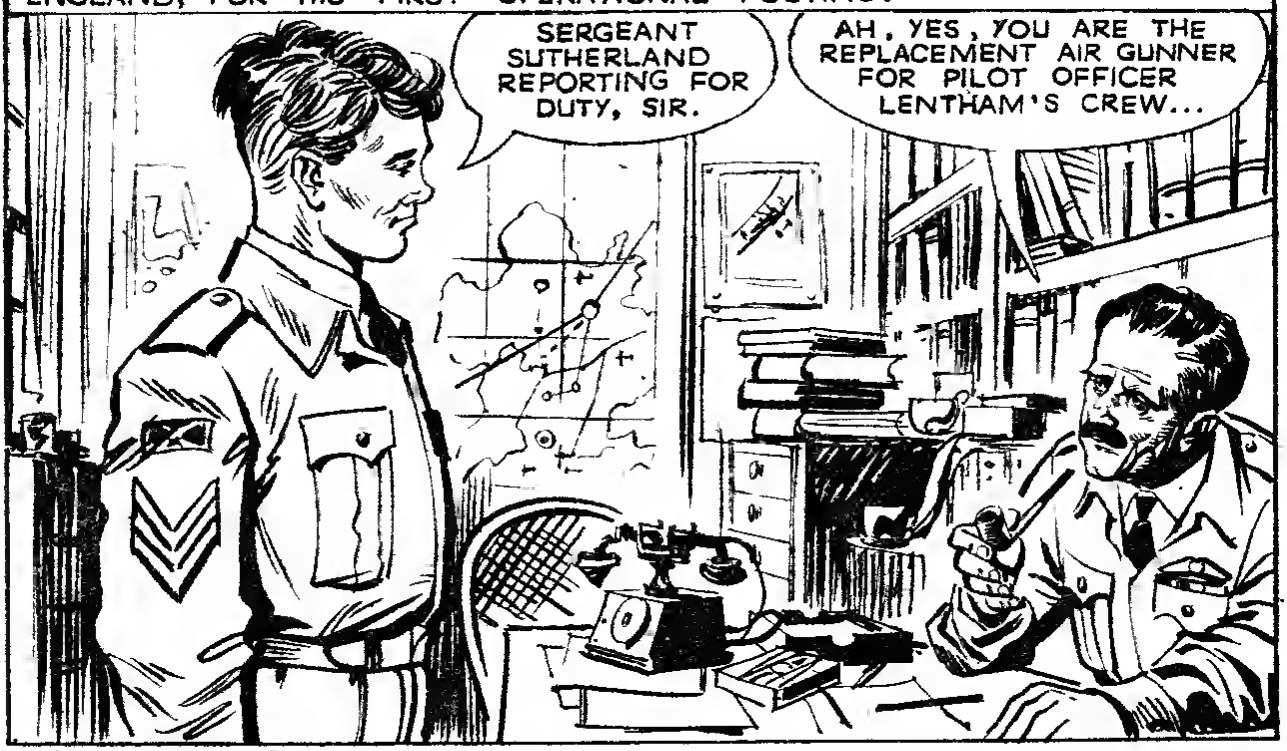
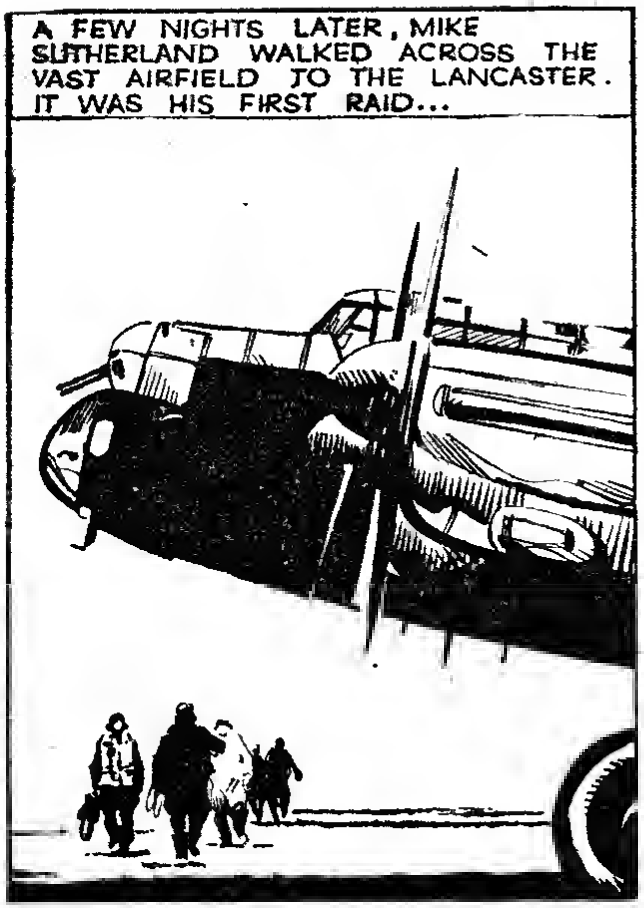
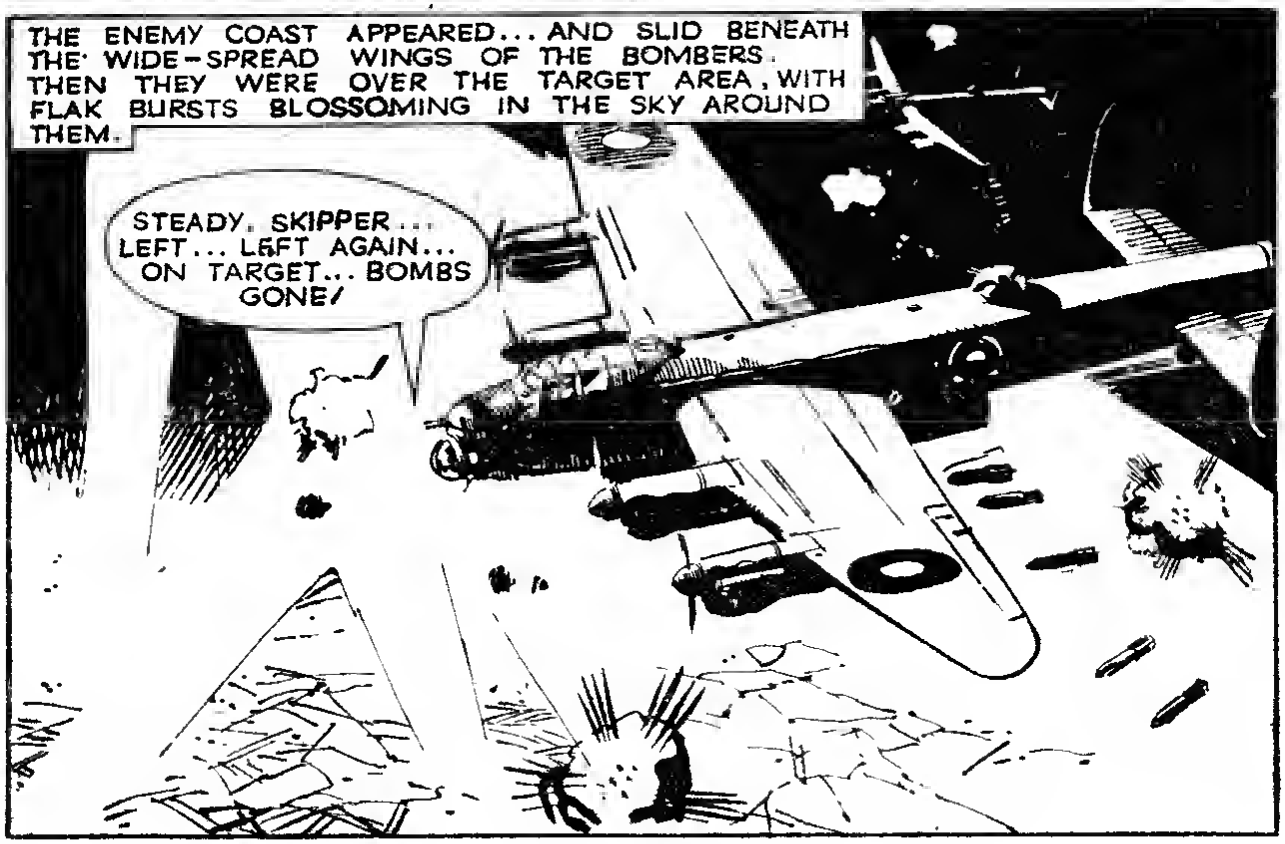
Chapter 1. ORDEAL BY FIRE

ONE SUCH MAN WAS SERGEANT MIKE SUTHERLAND. IN MID 1943, FRESH OUT OF TRAINING SCHOOL, HE REPORTED TO 1617 BOMBER SQUADRON'S BASE, SET IN AN ISOLATED PART OF SOUTHERN ENGLAND, FOR HIS FIRST OPERATIONAL POSTING.

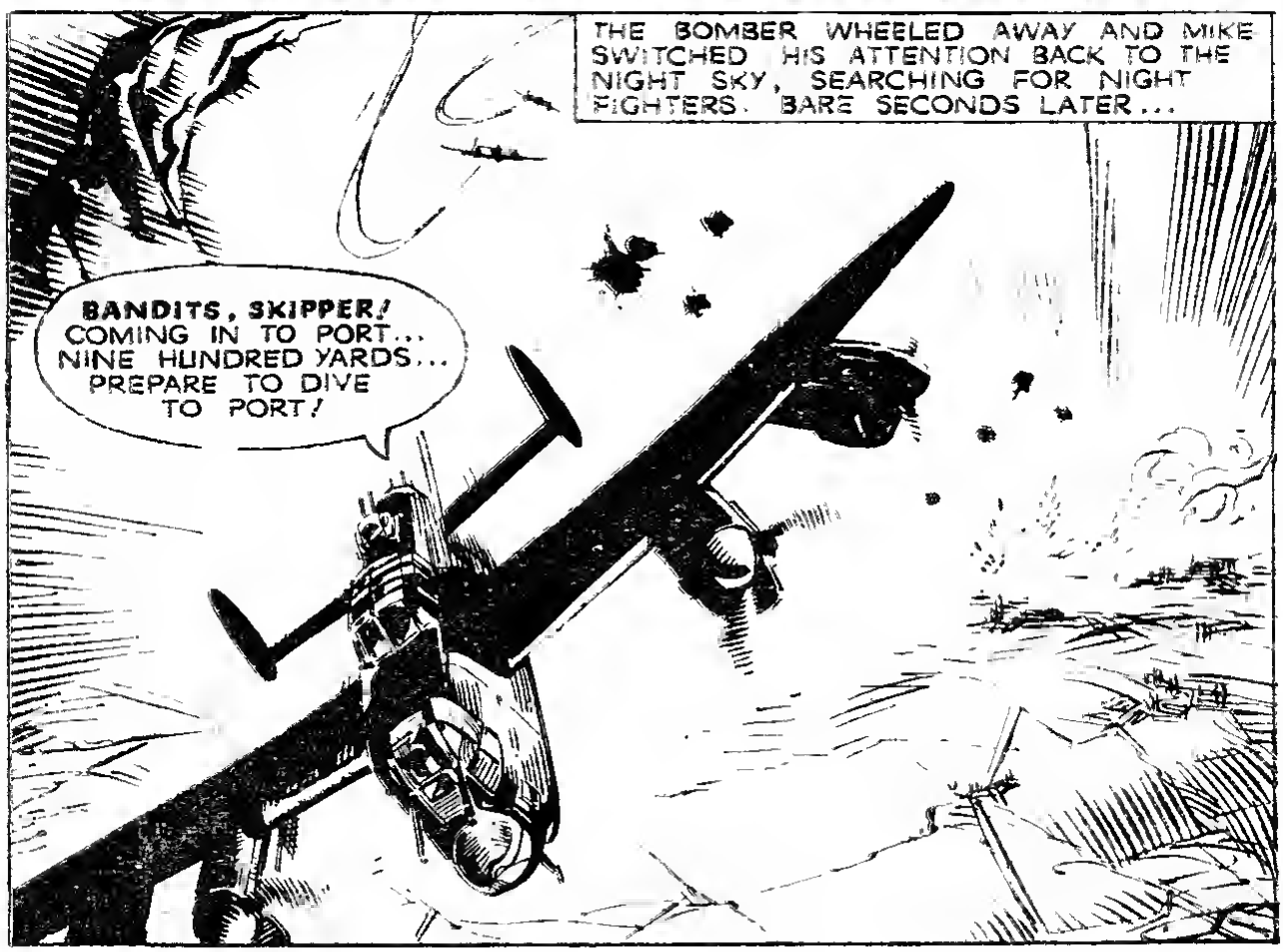


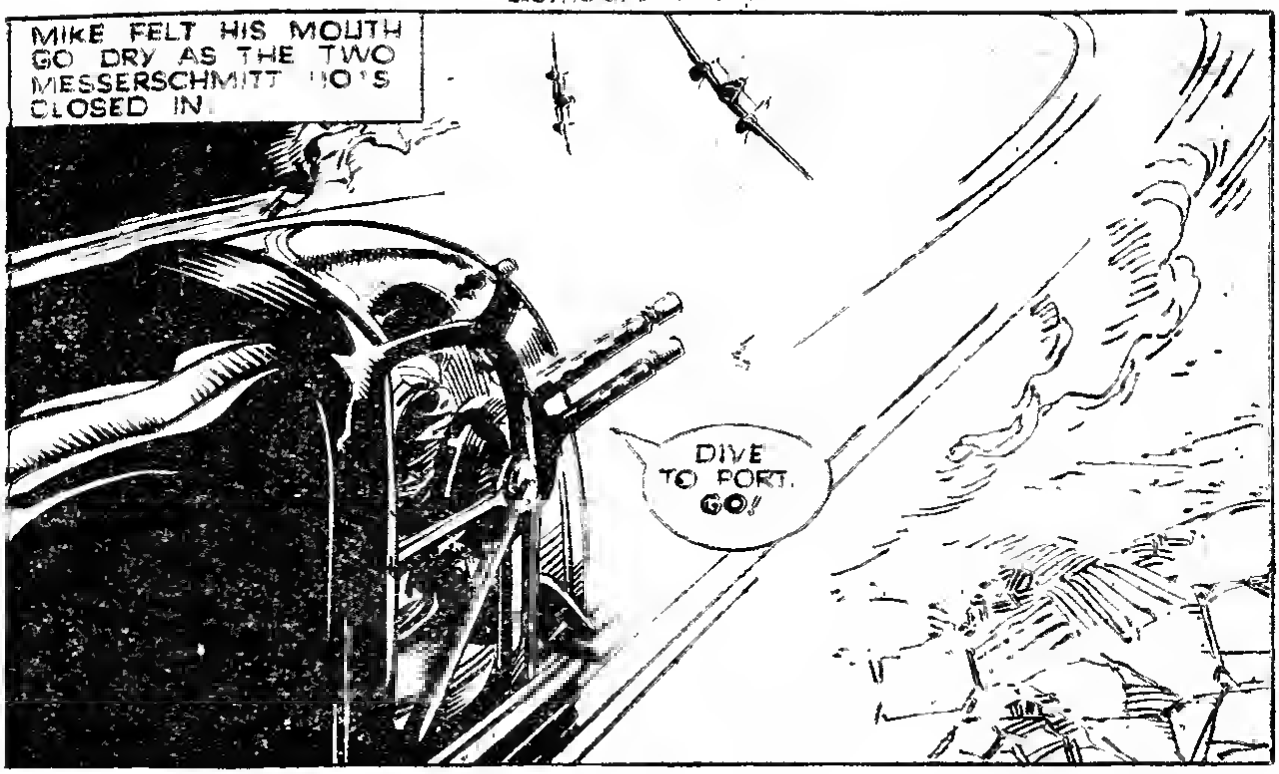

A FEW NIGHTS LATER, MIKE SUTHERLAND WALKED ACROSS THE VAST AIRFIELD TO THE LANCASTER. IT WAS HIS FIRST RAID...

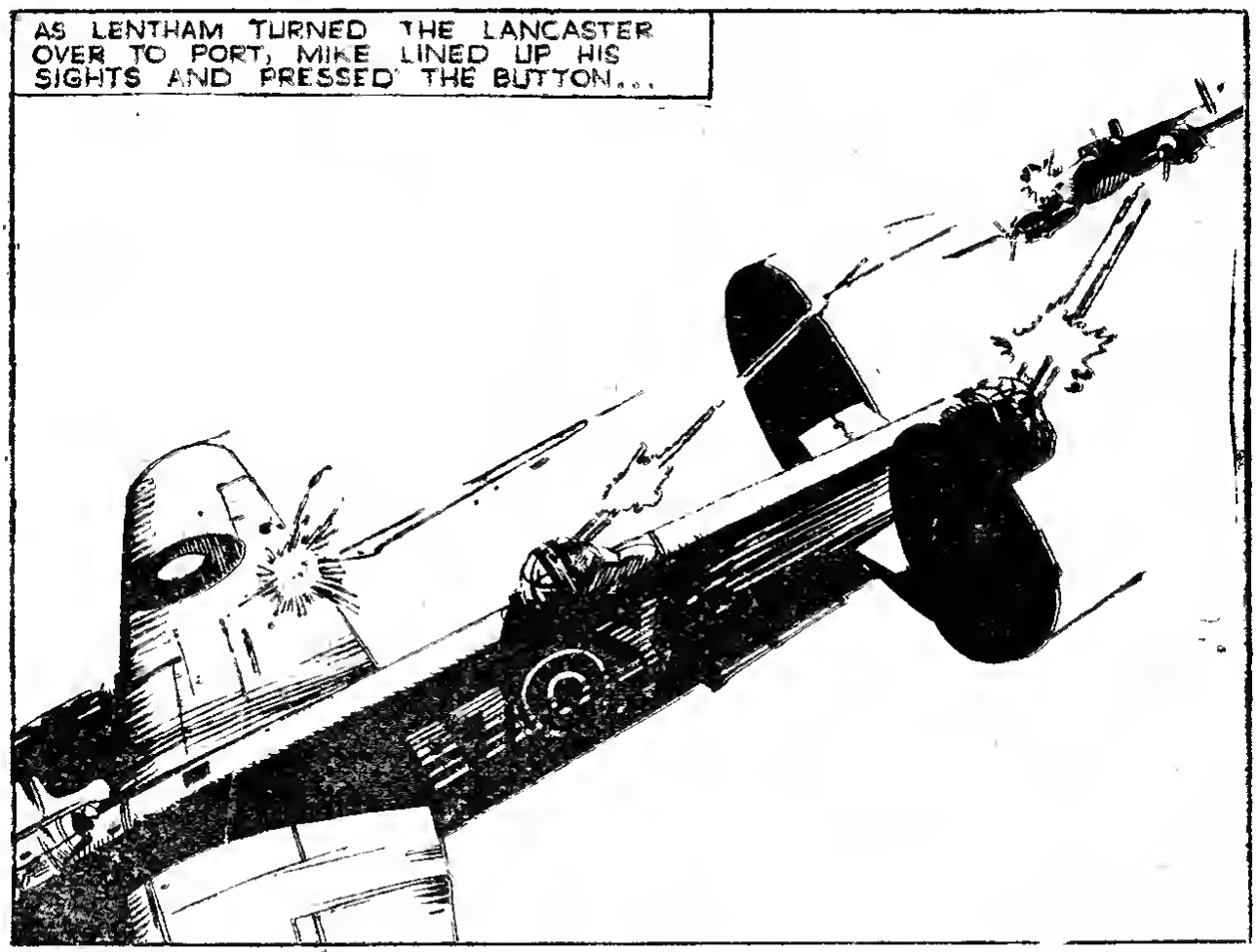
A THRILL OF MINGLED EXCITEMENT AND APPREHENSION RAN THROUGH MIKE AS THE GIANT BOMBER LIFTED INTO THE STAR-STUDDED BLACKNESS. SOON THE COLD, GREY WATERS OF THE NORTH SEA LAY BELOW...
SKIPPER TO TAIL-GUNNER! YOU MAY TEST YOUR GUNS NOW!
TESTING, SKIPPER... EVERYTHING OKAY!

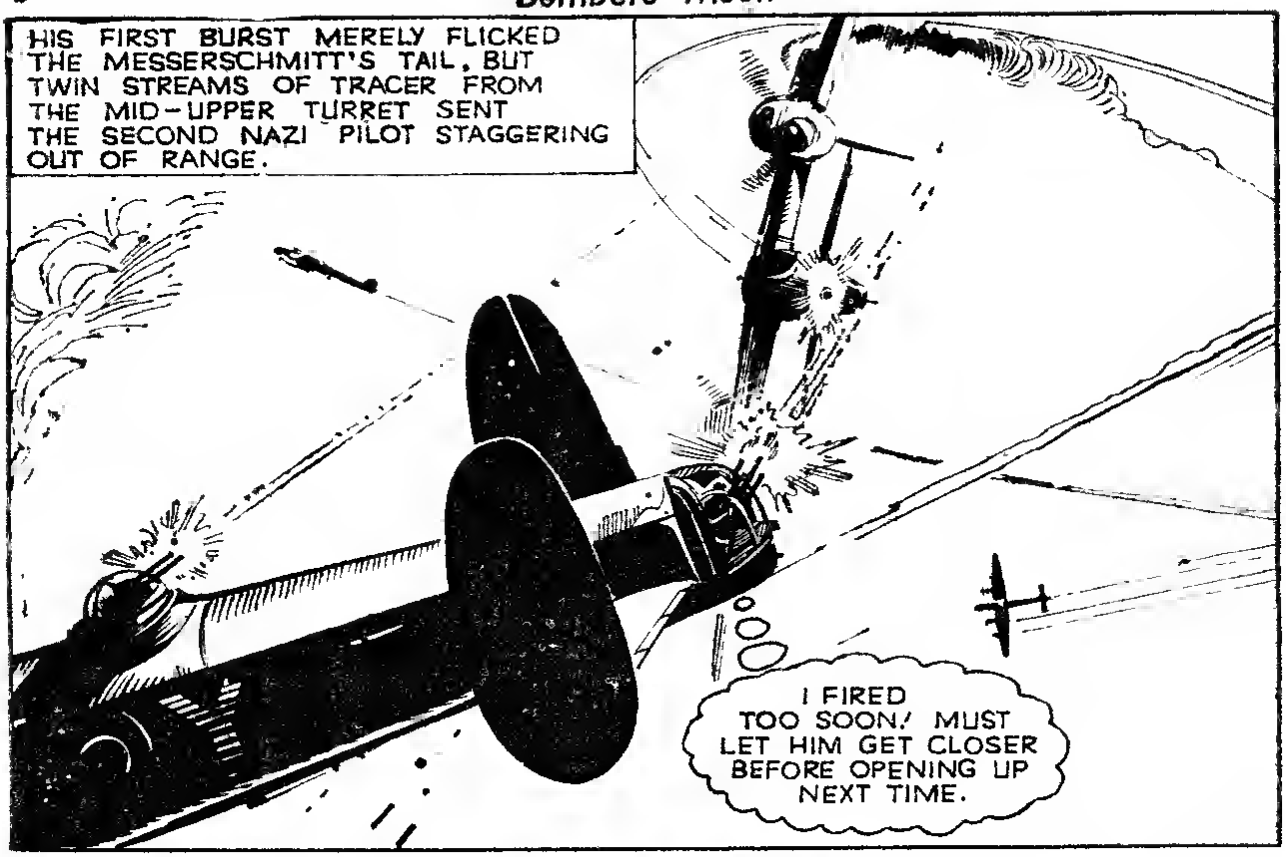

THE ENEMY COAST APPEARED... AND SLID BENEATH THE WIDE-SPREAD WINGS OF THE BOMBERS. THEN THEY WERE OVER THE TARGET AREA, WITH FLAK BURSTS BLOSSOMING IN THE SKY AROUND THEM.
STEADY, SKIPPER... LEFT... LEFT AGAIN... ON TARGET... BOMBS GONE!

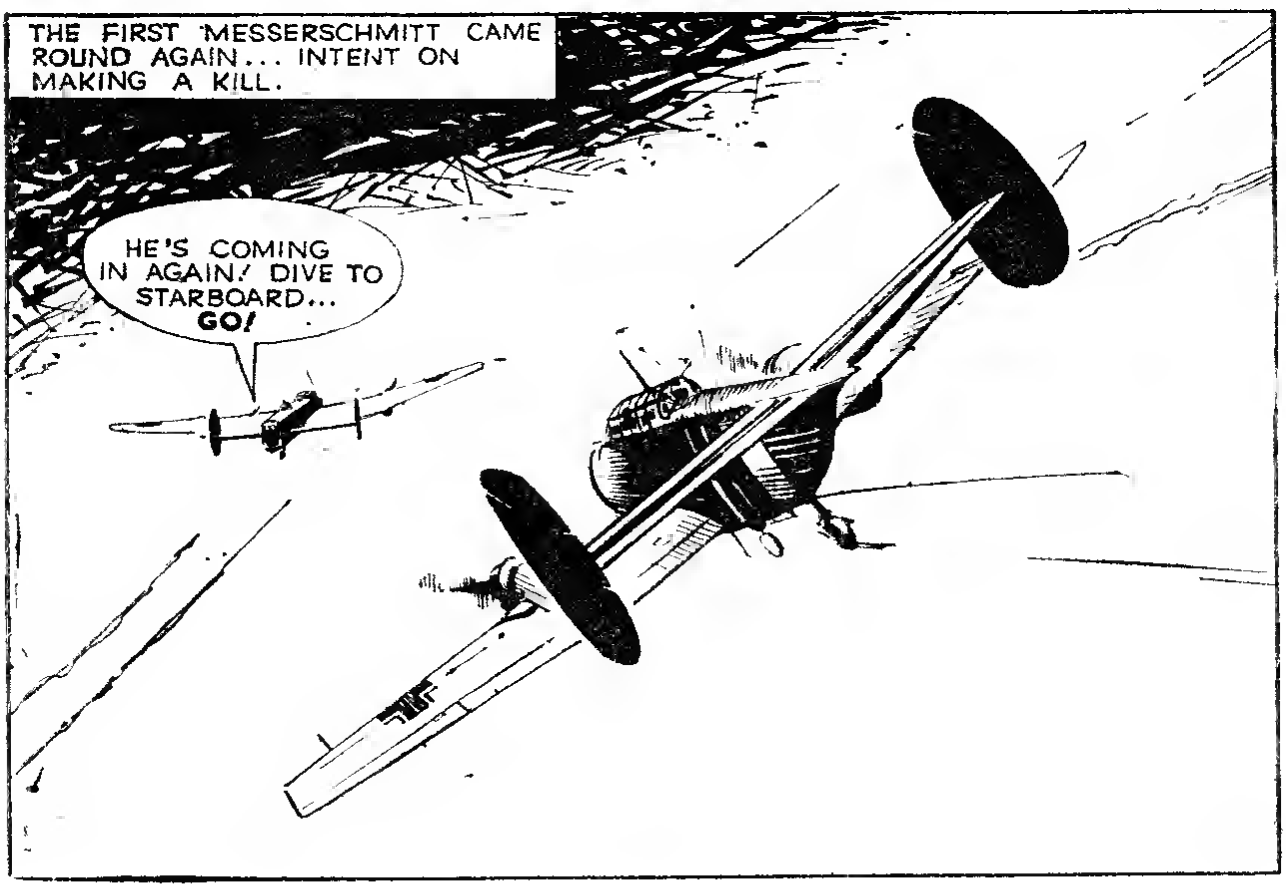
MIKE FELT THE LANCASTER LIFT AS THE BOMBS LEFT THEIR RACKS, TO FALL AWAY INTO THE CAULDRON OF SMOKE AND FLAME BELOW.
PHEW! CAN'T SAY I LIKE THIS FLAK OVER MUCH... BUT I'D SOONER BE UP HERE THAN DOWN THERE UNDER THAT LOT!

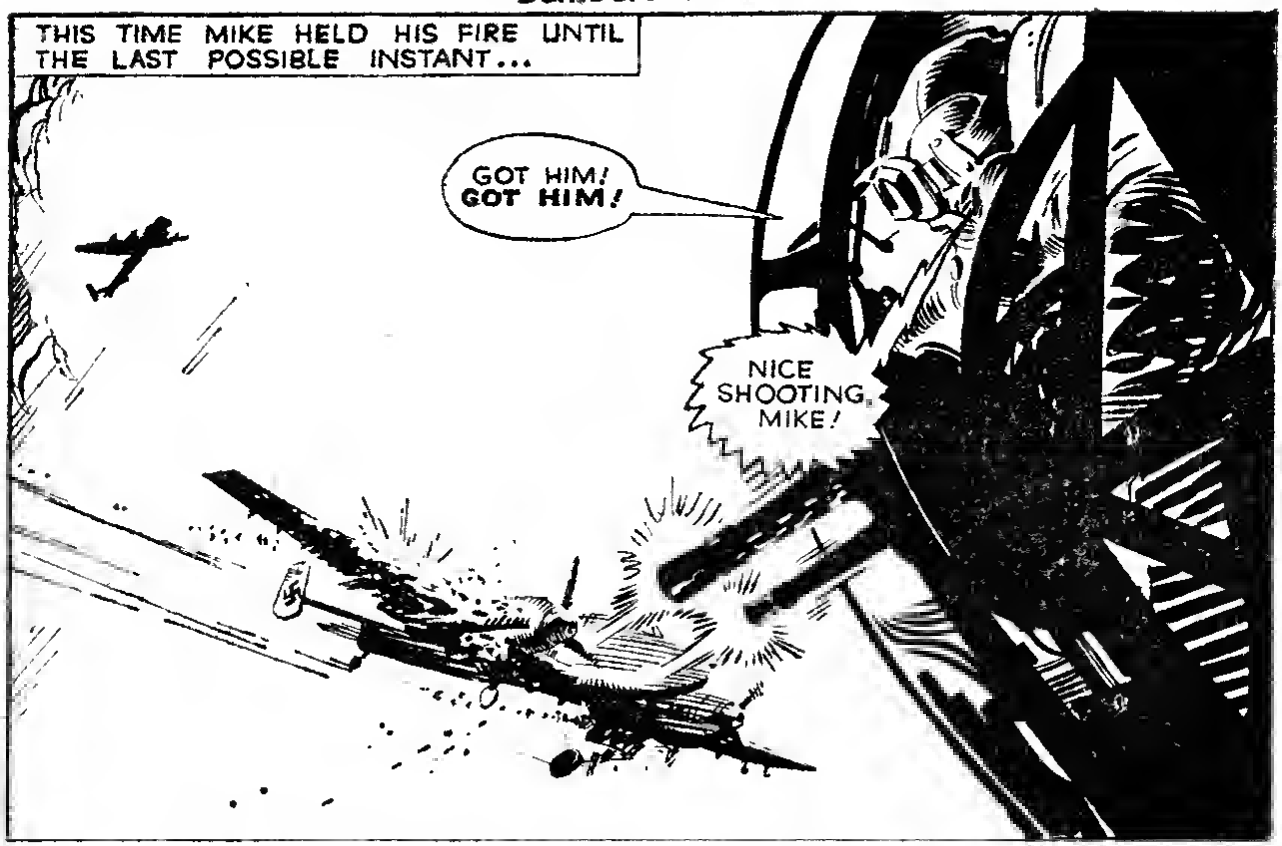

THE BOMBER WHEELED AWAY AND MIKE SWITCHED HIS ATTENTION BACK TO THE NIGHT SKY, SEARCHING FOR NIGHT FIGHTERS. BARE SECONDS LATER...
BANDITS, SKIPPER! COMING IN TO PORT... NINE HUNDRED YARDS... PREPARE TO DIVE TO PORT!


MIKE FELT HIS MOUTH GO DRY AS THE TWO MESSERSCHMITT 110'S CLOSED IN.
DIVE TO PORT. GO!


AS LENTHAM TURNED THE LANCASTER OVER TO PORT, MIKE LINED UP HIS SIGHTS AND PRESSED THE BUTTON...


HIS FIRST BURST MERELY FLICKED THE MESSERSCHMITT'S TAIL, BUT TWIN STREAMS OF TRACER FROM THE MID-UPPER TURRET SENT THE SECOND NAZI PILOT STAGGERING OUT OF RANGE.
I FIRED TOO SOON! MUST LET HIM GET CLOSER BEFORE OPENING UP NEXT TIME.

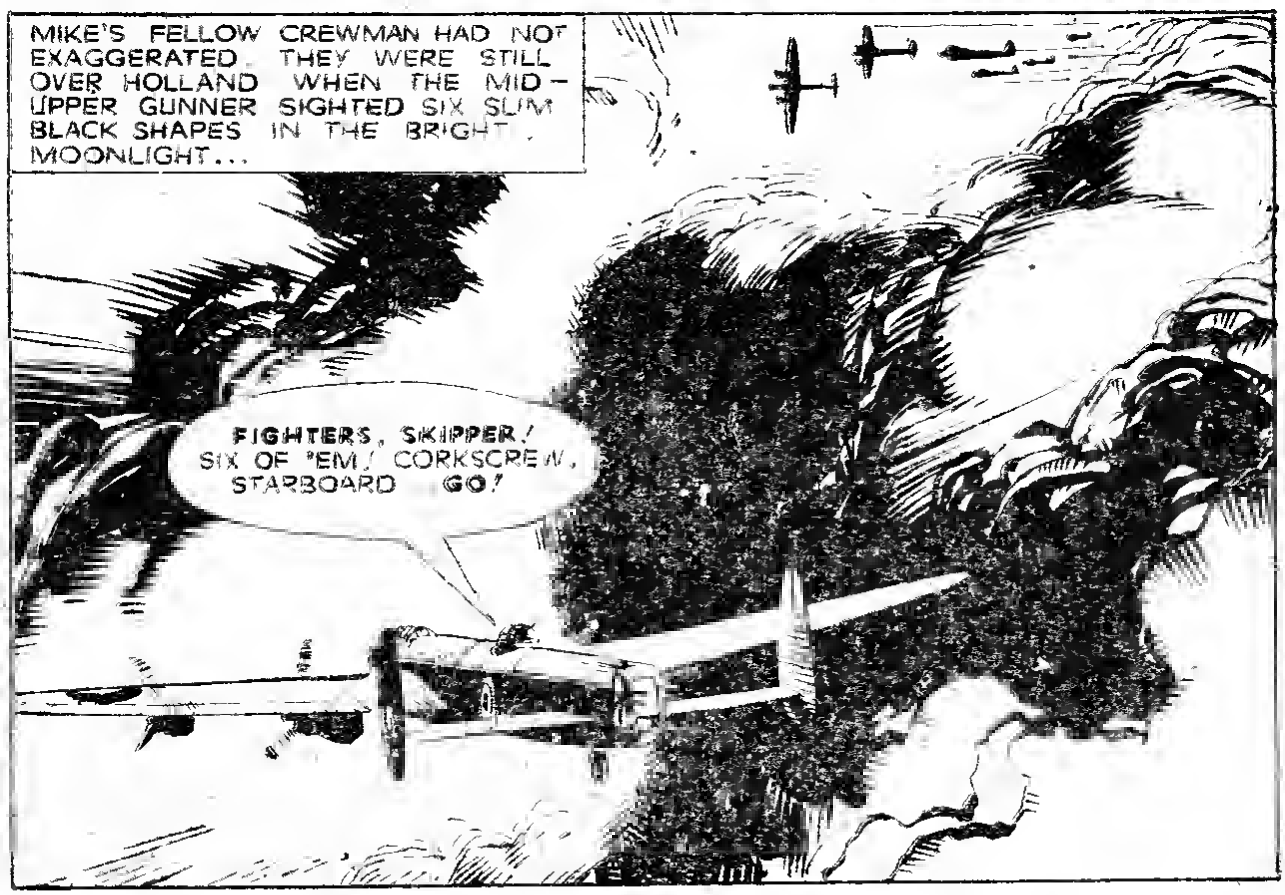

THE FIRST MESSERSCHMITT CAME ROUND AGAIN... INTENT ON MAKING A KILL.
HE'S COMING IN AGAIN! DIVE TO STARBOARD... GO!

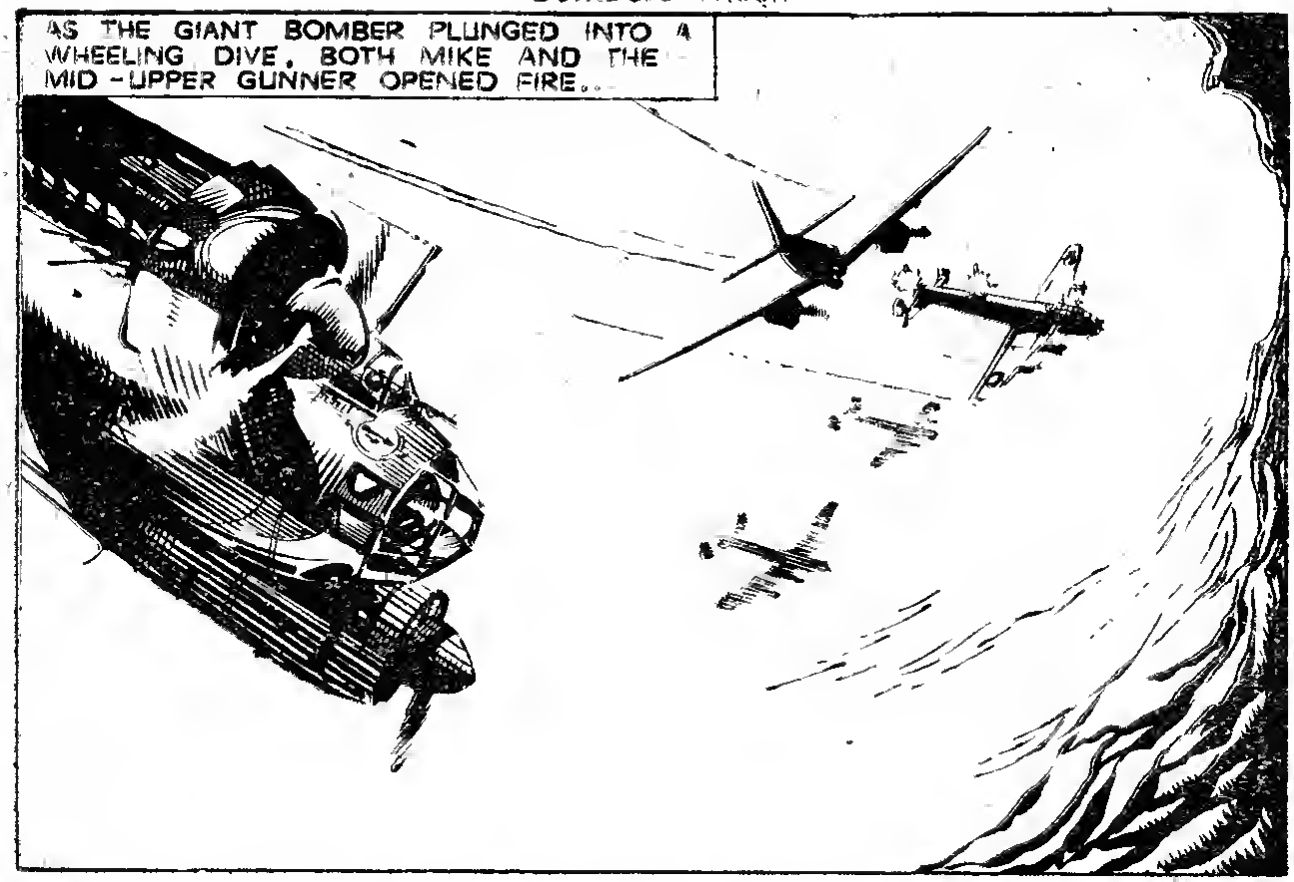

THIS TIME MIKE HELD HIS FIRE UNTIL THE LAST POSSIBLE INSTANT...
GOT HIM! GOT HIM!
NICE SHOOTING, MIKE!

MIKE HAD SURVIVED HIS BAPTISM OF FIRE AND HE FACED HIS NEXT OPERATION WITH CONFIDENCE. BUT ON THE NEXT TWO FLIGHTS THEY SAW NO NIGHT FIGHTERS FOR BOTH RAIDS WERE ON LIGHTLY DEFENDED TARGETS...
THAT WAS A PIECE OF CAKE! HAVE THE LUFTWAFFE RUN OUT OF FIGHTERS OR SOMETHING?
DON'T KID YOURSELF, MIKE. WE'VE BEEN LUCKY... BUT JUST WAIT UNTIL WE'RE GIVEN A REAL TARGET TO HIT. YOU'LL SEE ALL THE FIGHTERS YOU WANT THEN!

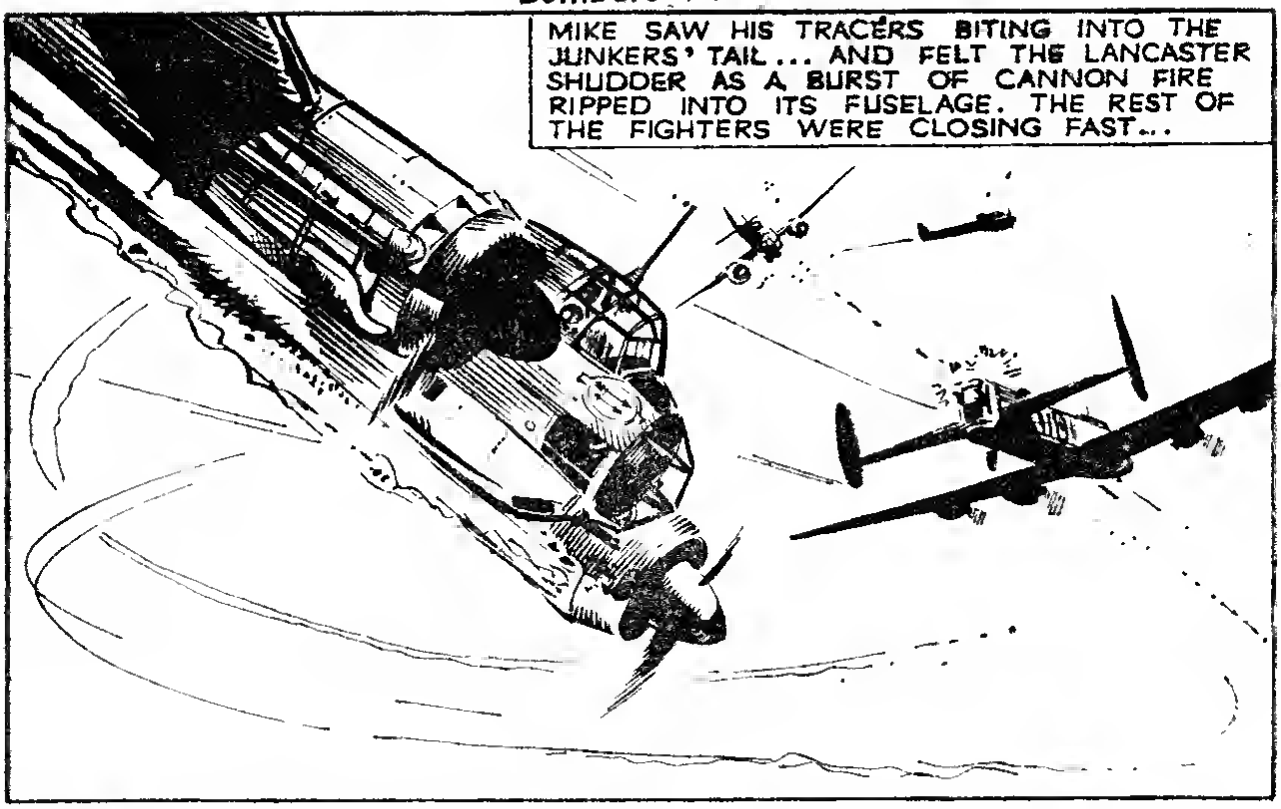
TWO DAYS OFF OPERATIONS – AND THEN CAME THE NEXT BRIEFING
TONIGHT'S TARGET IS THE RUHR VALLEY ONCE AGAIN A GROUP OF EXPLOSIVES FACTORIES ONLY RECENTLY DISCOVERED.

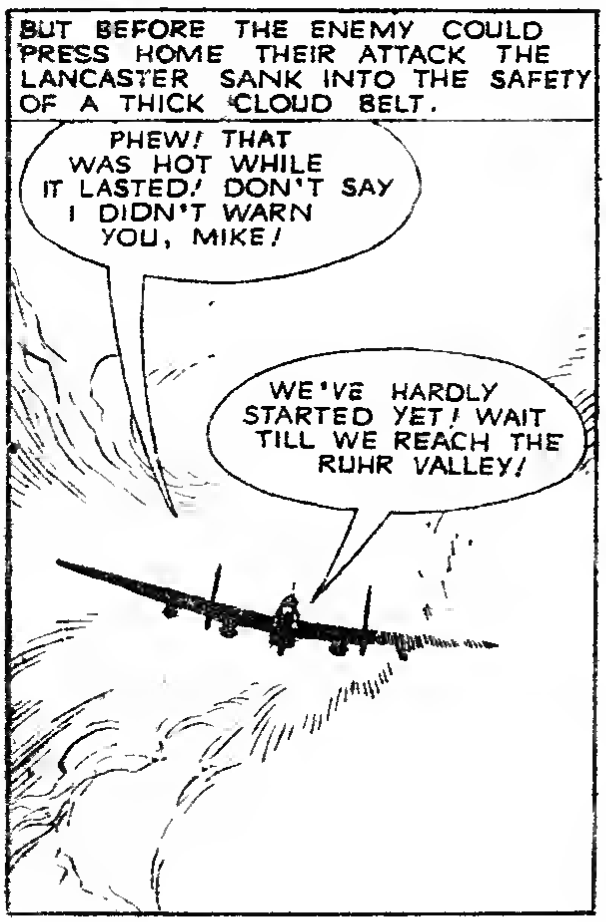
FURTHER DETAILS OF TARGET, COURSES, WEATHER FORECASTS, BOMB-LOAD WERE GIVEN...
WELL, MIKE, IF IT'S ACTION YOU WANT YOU'LL GET IT TONIGHT!

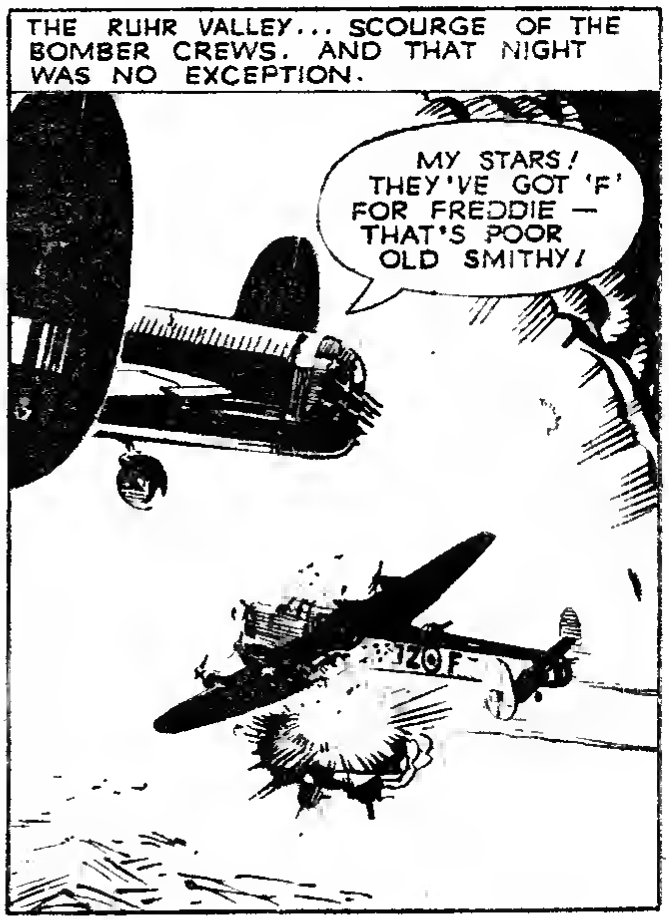

MIKE'S FELLOW CREWMAN HAD NOT EXAGGERATED. THEY WERE STILL OVER HOLLAND WHEN THE MID-UPPER GUNNER SIGHTED SIX SLIM BLACK SHAPES IN THE BRIGHT MOONLIGHT...
FIGHTERS, SKIPPER! SIX OF 'EM! CORKSCREW, STARBOARD GO!

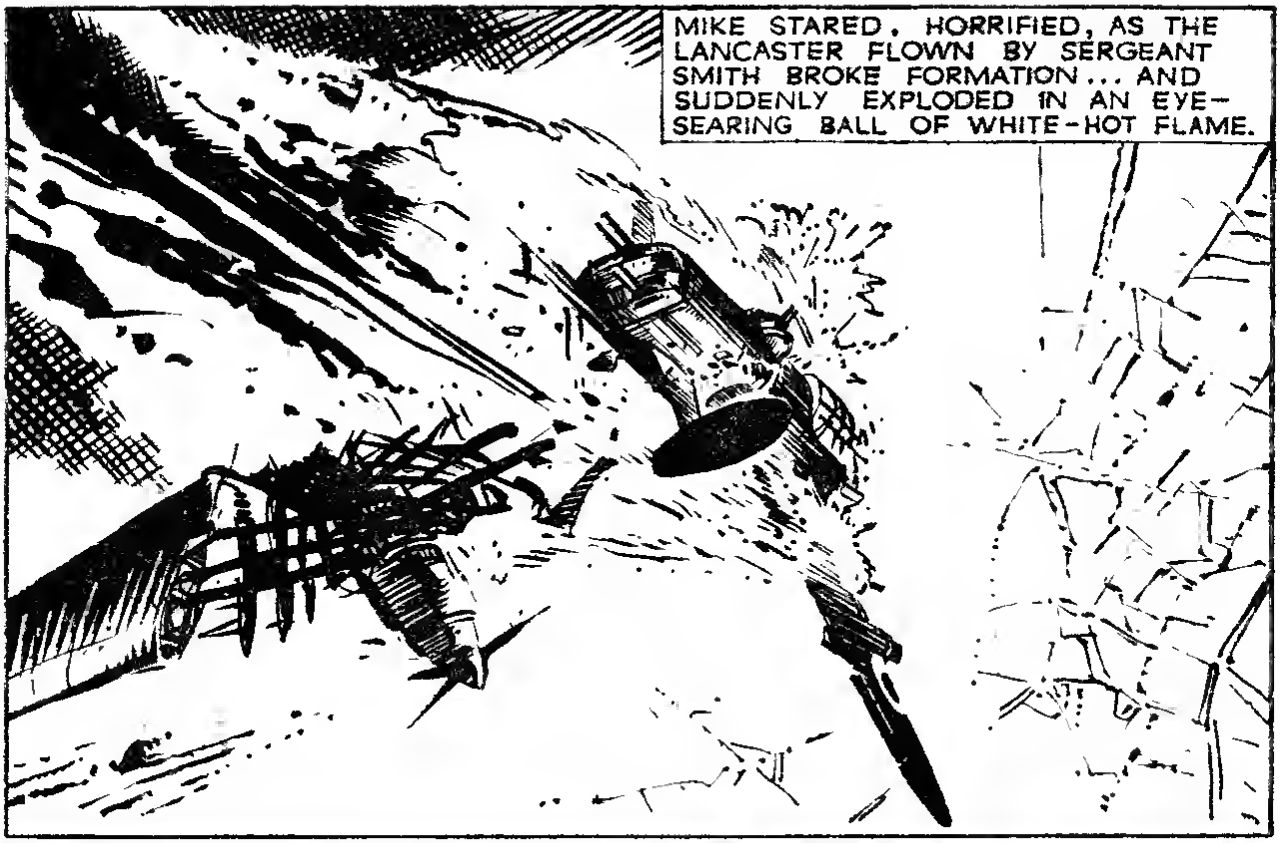

AS THE GIANT BOMBER PLUNGED INTO A WHEELING DIVE, BOTH MIKE AND THE MID-UPPER GUNNER OPENED FIRE...

THE LEADING JUNKERS 88 SPUN AWAY TRAILING SMOKE AND FLAME, BUT THE OTHERS ARROWED IN. FRANTICALLY, MIKE ROTATED HIS TURRET...
TAKE THAT, YOU RAT!


MIKE SAW HIS TRACERS BITING INTO THE JUNKERS' TAIL... AND FELT THE LANCASTER SHUDDER AS A BURST OF CANNON FIRE RIPPED INTO ITS FUSELAGE. THE REST OF THE FIGHTERS WERE CLOSING FAST...

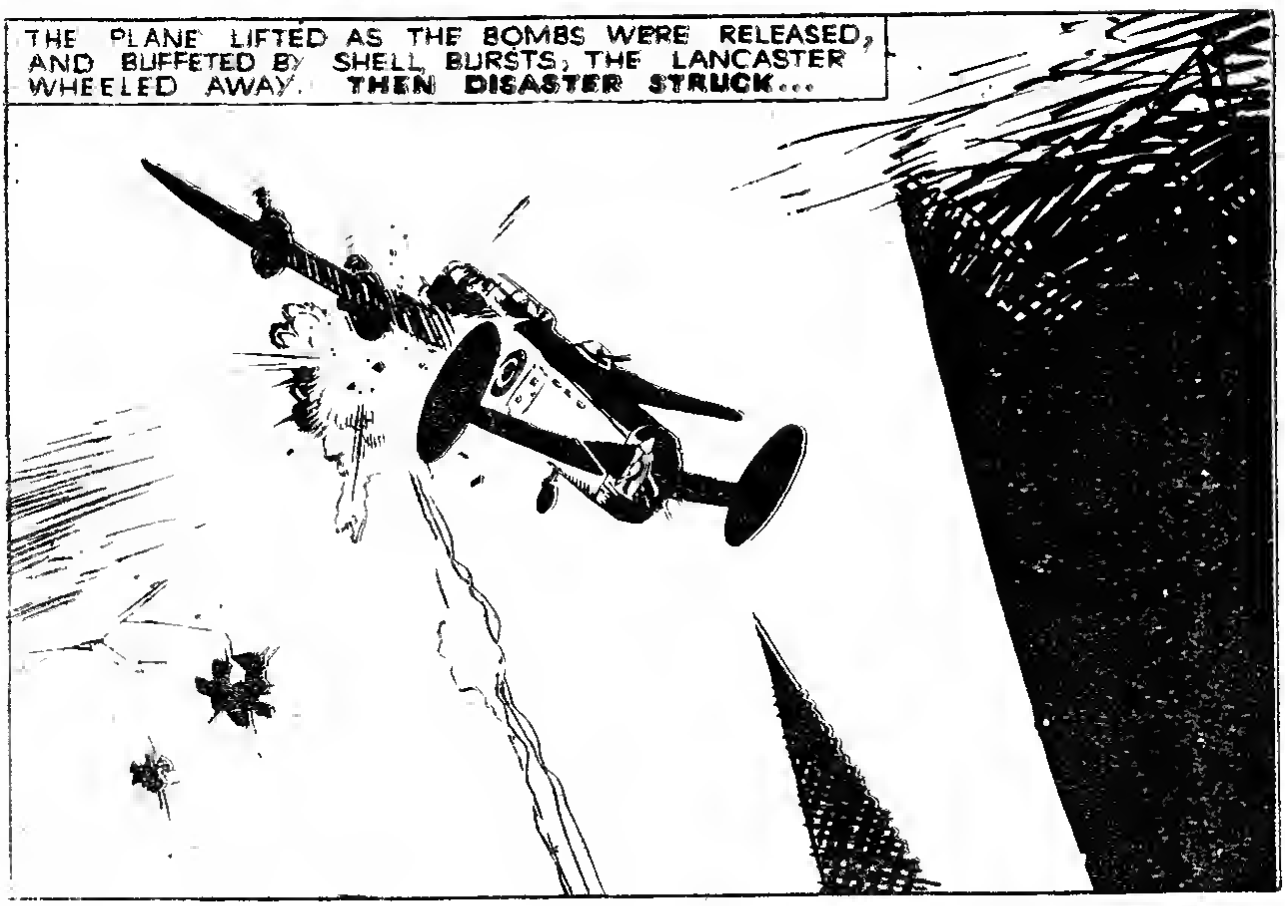

BUT BEFORE THE ENEMY COULD PRESS HOME THEIR ATTACK THE LANCASTER SANK INTO THE SAFETY OF A THICK CLOUD BELT.
PHEW! THAT WAS HOT WHILE IT LASTED! DON'T SAY I DIDN'T WARN YOU, MIKE!
WE'VE HARDLY STARTED YET! WAIT TILL WE REACH THE RUHR VALLEY!


THE RUHR VALLEY... SCOURGE OF THE BOMBER CREWS. AND THAT NIGHT WAS NO EXCEPTION.
MY STARS! THEY'VE GOT 'F' FOR FREDDIE — THAT'S POOR OLD SMITHY!


MIKE STARED, HORRIFIED, AS THE LANCASTER FLOWN BY SERGEANT SMITH BROKE FORMATION... AND SUDDENLY EXPLODED IN AN EYE-SEARING BALL OF WHITE-HOT FLAME.

AHEAD OF LENTHAM'S AIRCRAFT, AN INFERNO OF FLAME AND SMOKE MARKED THE PLACE WHERE THE FIRST BOMBS HAD ALREADY FOUND THEIR TARGETS. THE SECOND WAVE OF BOMBERS THUNDERED IN... AND THE GERMAN GUNNERS GREETED THEM WITH A BARRAGE OF INTENSE FURY.

THROUGH THAT TERRIFYING CURTAIN OF JAGGED METAL SPLINTERS SNARLED LENTHAM'S MACHINE .. STRAIGHT AND LEVEL ON ITS BOMBING RUN.


THE PLANE LIFTED AS THE BOMBS WERE RELEASED, AND BUFFETED BY SHELL BURSTS, THE LANCASTER WHEELED AWAY. THEN DISASTER STRUCK...

FLAME AND SMOKE BELCHED FROM THE DAMAGED MOTOR AS LENTHAM BROUGHT THE LANCASTER ROUND, FIGHTING DESPERATELY TO REGAIN CONTROL AND ESCAPE THE PROBING BEAMS OF SEARCHLIGHTS.

PORT INNER PROPELLER FEATHERED, SKIPPER!

NAVIGATOR HERE, SKIPPER! MID-UPPER'S CAUGHT A PACKET IN HIS LEG!

WITH THE OMINOUS FLICKERING GLOW OF FLAMES REACHING OUT GREEDILY ALONG THE PORT WING, LENTHAM TURNED FOR HOME.

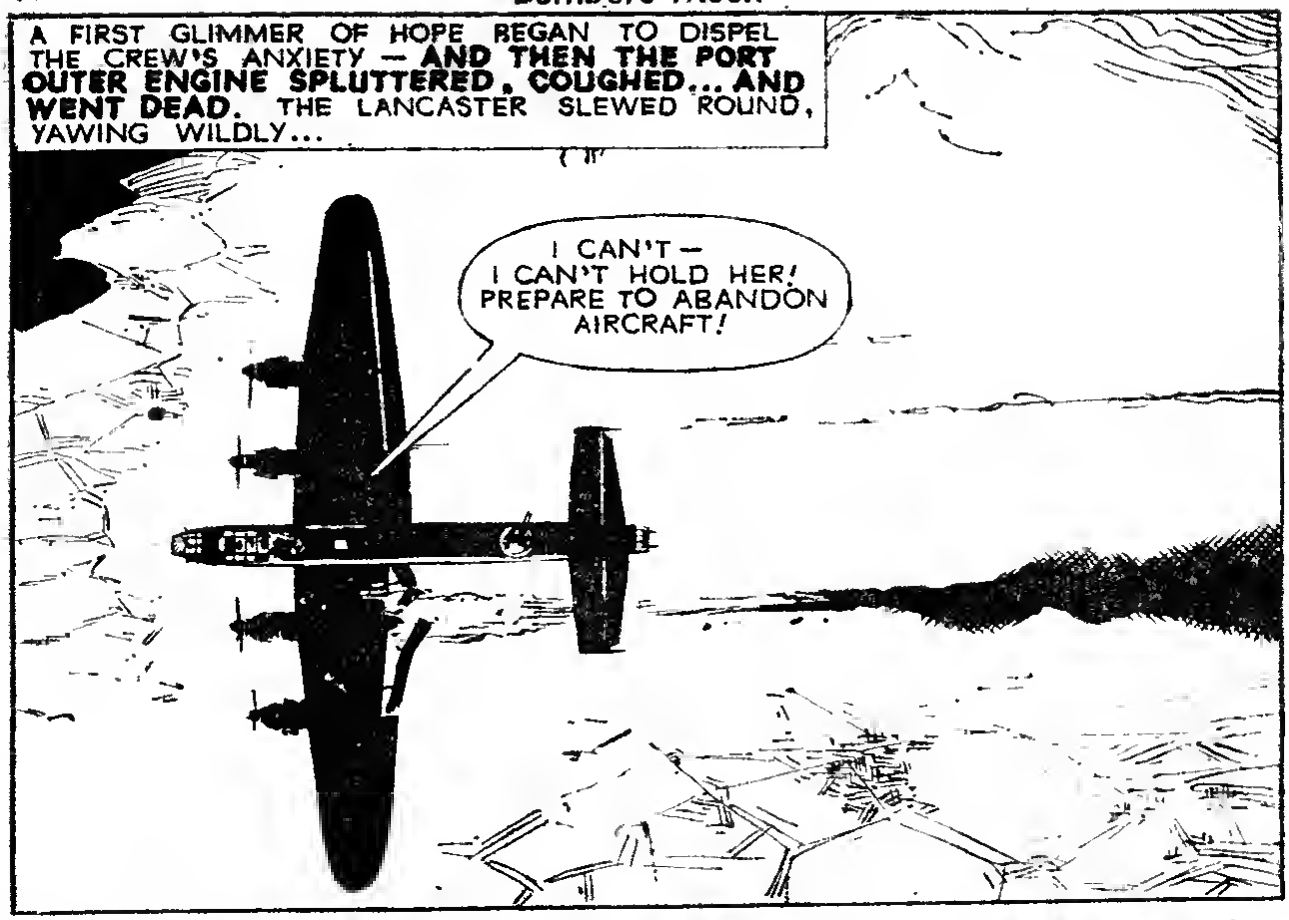
LET'S HOPE WE DON'T MEET UP WITH ANY JERRY FIGHTERS. WE'LL BE DEAD DUCKS IF WE DO!

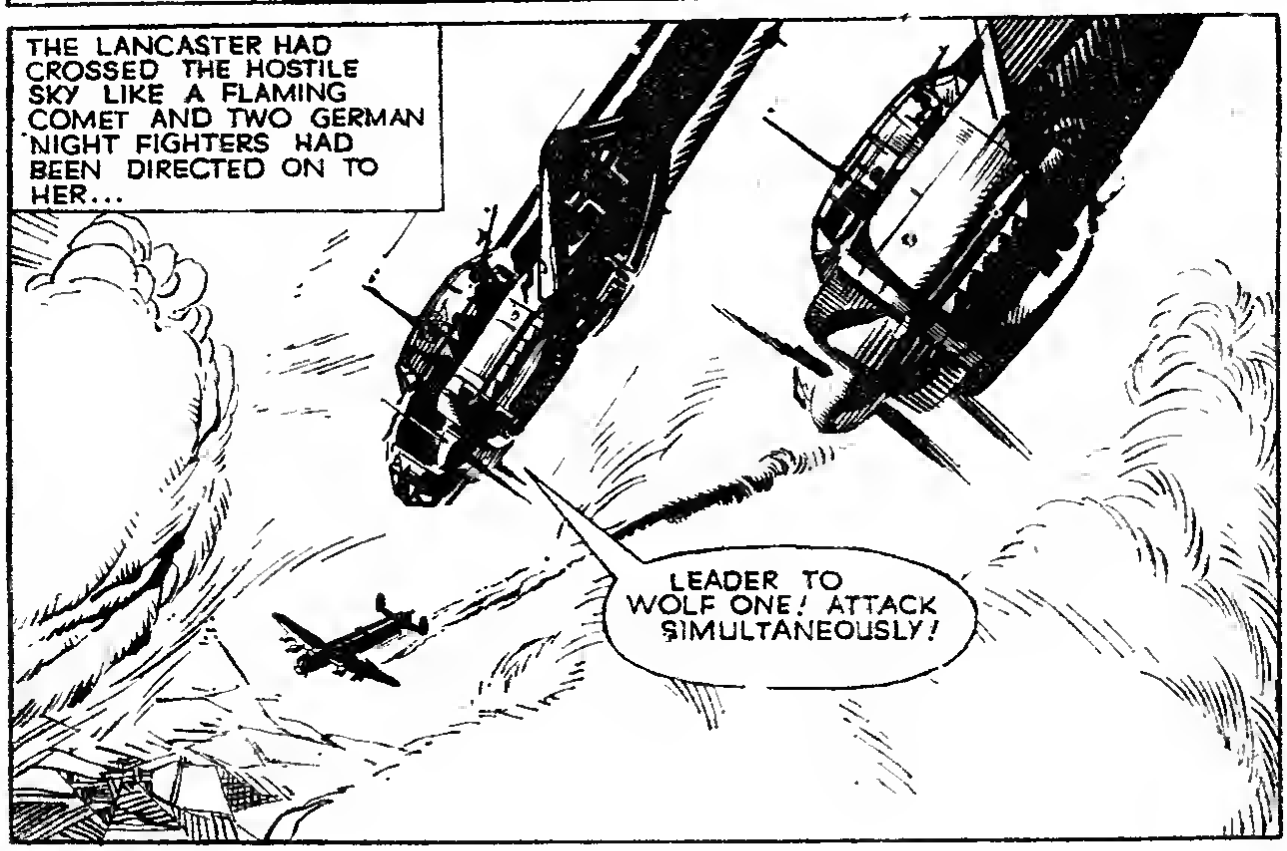
THE STRICKEN LANCASTER LABOURED NORTH-WESTWARD... AND ALL THE TIME, THE FLAMES WERE BEING FANNED BY THE SLIPSTREAM INTO A WHITE-HOT GLOW.

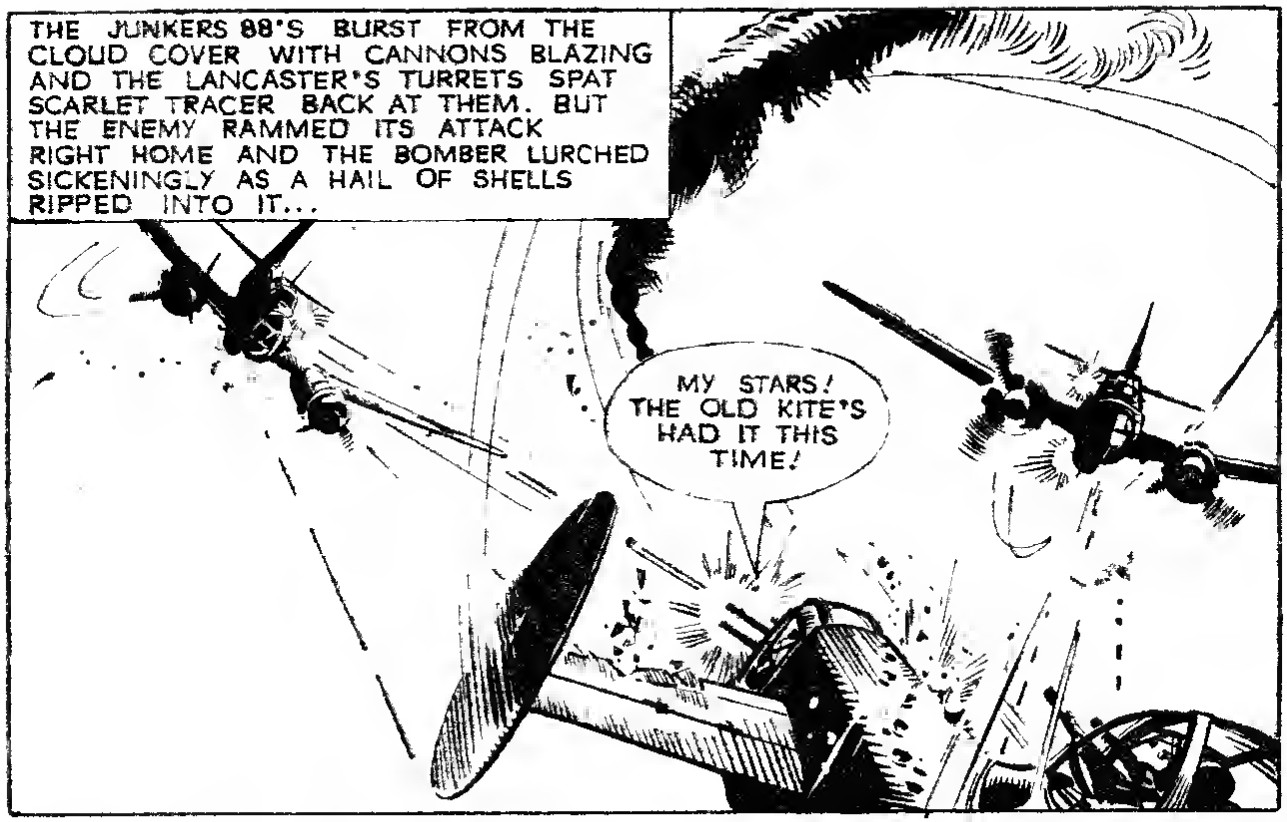
SKIPPER TO NAVIGATOR! WHAT'S OUR POSITION?

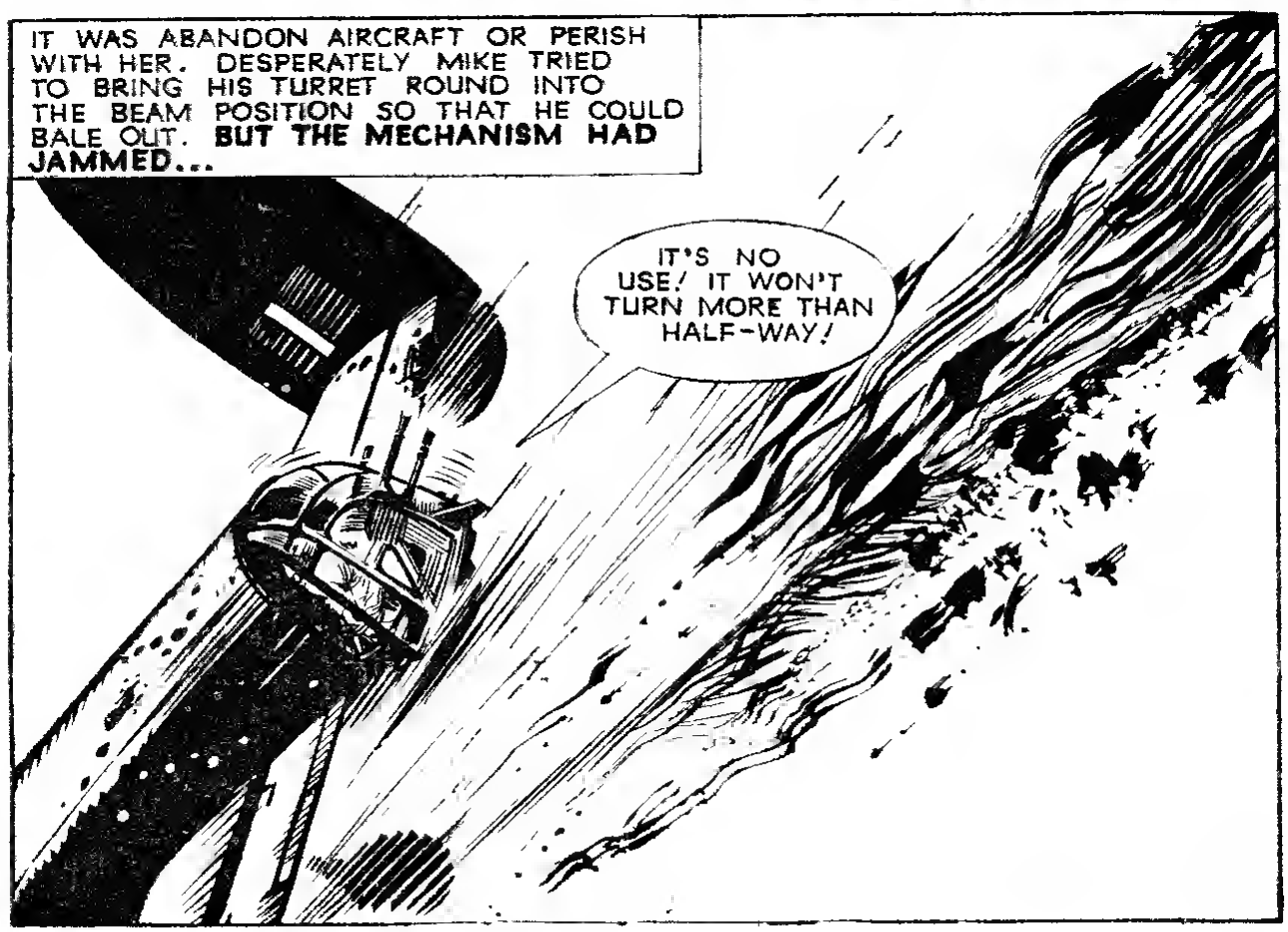
BELGIAN COAST COMING UP, SKIPPER!

NO SIGN OF FIGHTERS. THANK HEAVENS!

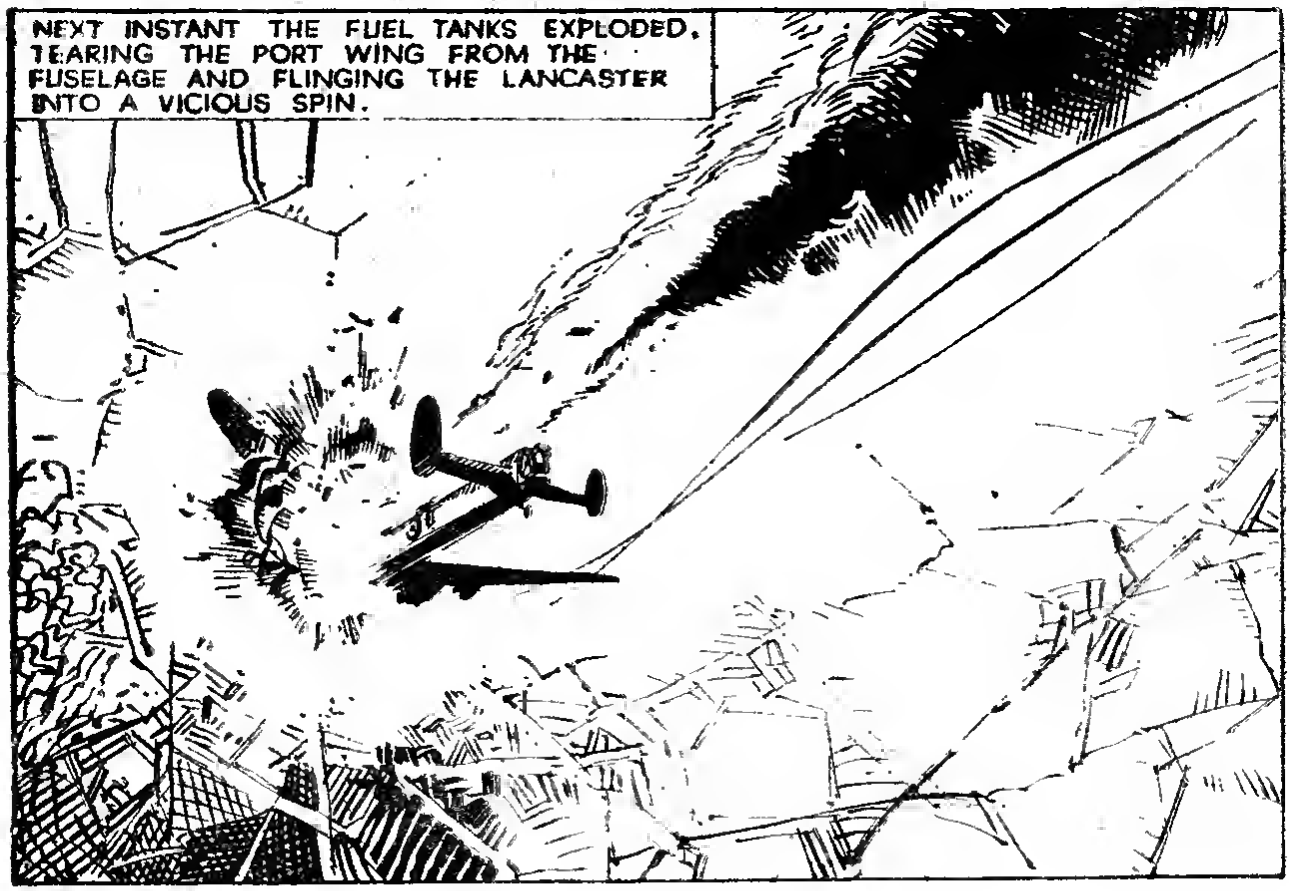

A FIRST GLIMMER OF HOPE BEGAN TO DISPEL THE CREW'S ANXIETY — AND THEN THE PORT OUTER ENGINE SPLUTTERED, COUGHED... AND WENT DEAD. THE LANCASTER SLEWED ROUND, YAWING WILDLY...
I CAN'T — I CAN'T HOLD HER! PREPARE TO ABANDON AIRCRAFT!

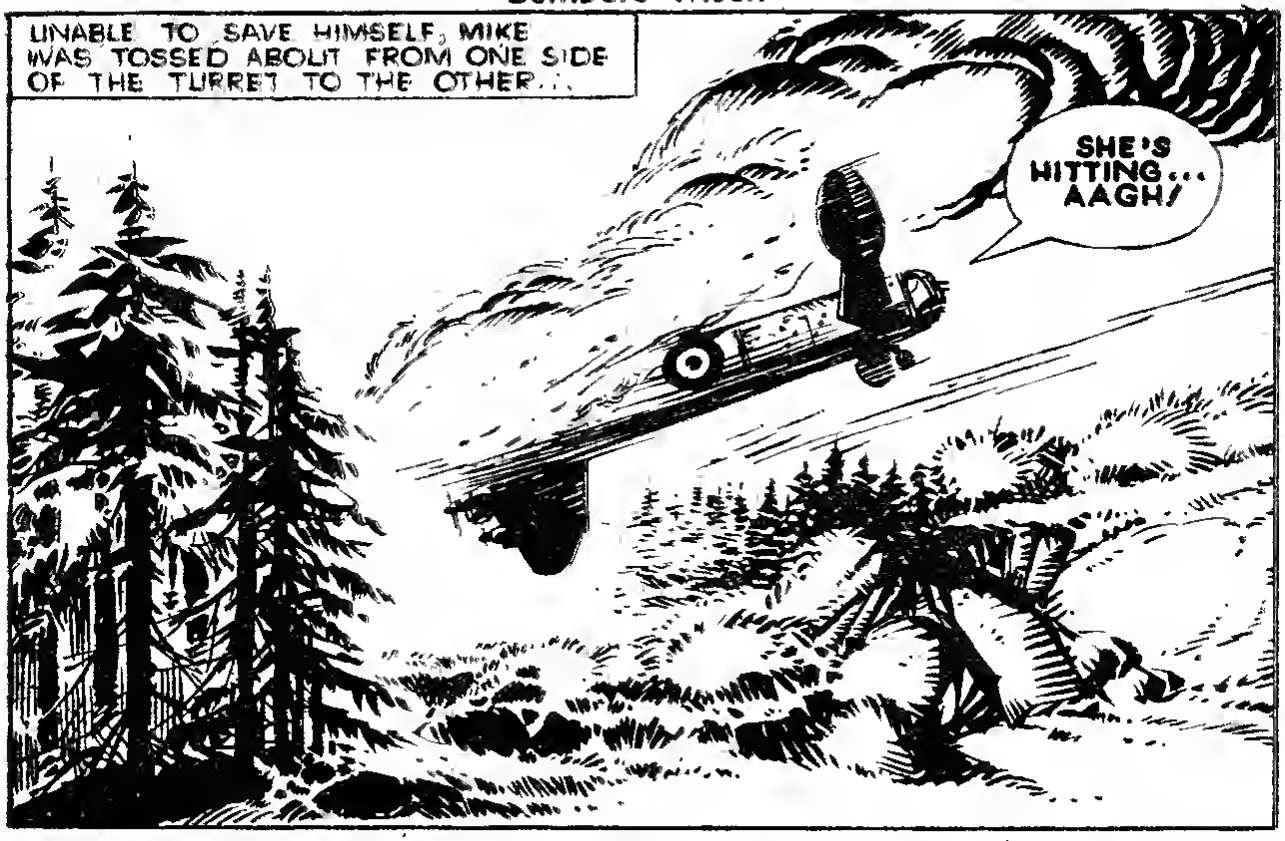

THE LANCASTER HAD CROSSED THE HOSTILE SKY LIKE A FLAMING COMET AND TWO GERMAN NIGHT FIGHTERS HAD BEEN DIRECTED ON TO HER...
LEADER TO WOLF ONE! ATTACK SIMULTANEOUSLY!

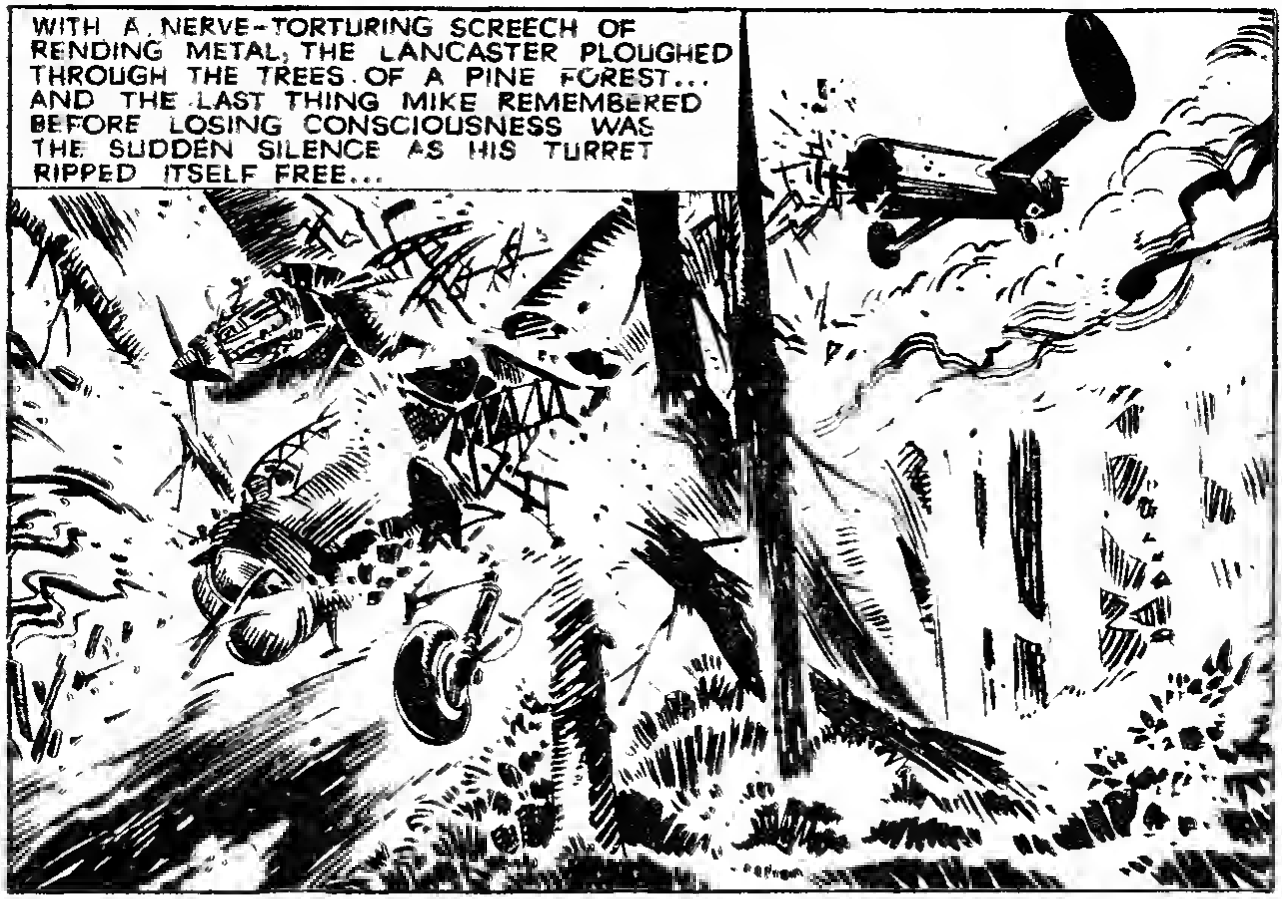

THE JUNKERS 88'S BURST FROM THE CLOUD COVER WITH CANNONS BLAZING AND THE LANCASTER'S TURRETS SPAT SCARLET TRACER BACK AT THEM. BUT THE ENEMY RAMMED ITS ATTACK RIGHT HOME AND THE BOMBER LURCHED SICKENINGLY AS A HAIL OF SHELLS RIPPED INTO IT...
MY STARS! THE OLD KITE'S HAD IT THIS TIME!


IT WAS ABANDON AIRCRAFT OR PERISH WITH HER. DESPERATELY MIKE TRIED TO BRING HIS TURRET ROUND INTO THE BEAM POSITION SO THAT HE COULD BALE OUT. BUT THE MECHANISM HAD JAMMED...
IT'S NO USE! IT WON'T TURN MORE THAN HALF-WAY!

TURNING, HE WRENCHED THE TURRET DOORS OPEN – TO BE MET BY A SEARING BLAST OF FLAME. COUGHING AND CHOKING, HE STAGGERED BACK...
AARGH!


NEXT INSTANT THE FUEL TANKS EXPLODED, TEARING THE PORT WING FROM THE FUSELAGE AND FLINGING THE LANCASTER INTO A VICIOUS SPIN.


UNABLE TO SAVE HIMSELF, MIKE WAS TOSSED ABOUT FROM ONE SIDE OF THE TURRET TO THE OTHER...
SHE'S HITTING... AAGH!


WITH A NERVE-TORTURING SCREECH OF RENDING METAL, THE LANCASTER PLOUGHED THROUGH THE TREES OF A PINE FOREST... AND THE LAST THING MIKE REMEMBERED BEFORE LOSING CONSCIOUSNESS WAS THE SUDDEN SILENCE AS HIS TURRET RIPPED ITSELF FREE...

Chapter 2. BELGIAN RENDEZVOUS

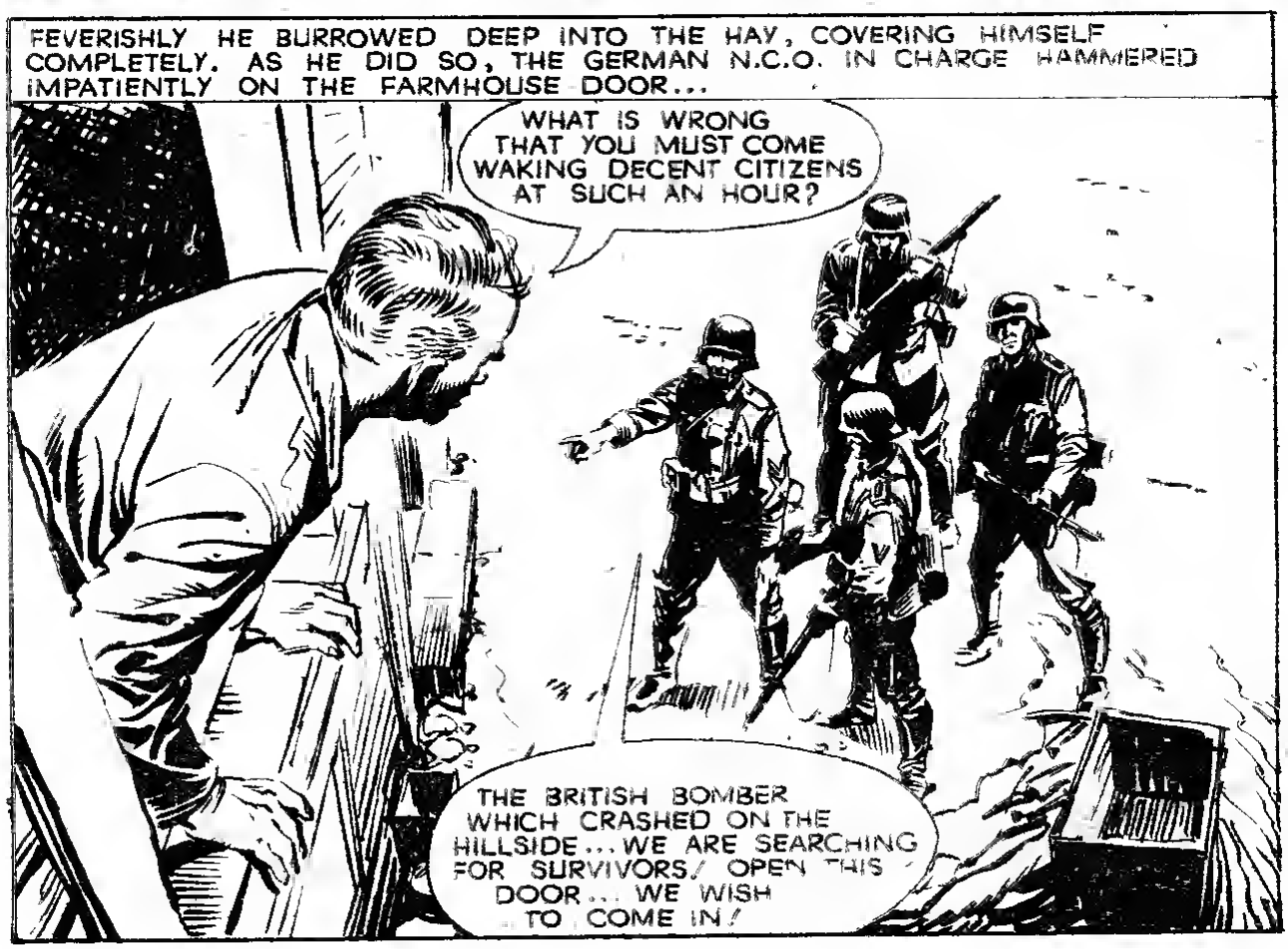
WHEN MIKE DRIFTED BACK FROM A DEEP WELL OF DARKNESS, SCARCELY ABLE TO BELIEVE THAT HE WAS STILL ALIVE, HE WAS NOT ALONE. NOR WAS HE IN HIS TURRET, BUT LYING ON THE GRASS OUTSIDE WITH TWO ROUGHLY GARBED MEN BENDING ANXIOUSLY OVER HIM.

AIDED BY THE TWO BELGIANS, MIKE STAGGERED TO HIS FEET.
THE REST OF THE CREW... WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM?
DEAD... KILLED IN THE CRASH!

THE AIRMAN PAUSED TO STARE IN SHOCKED REALISATION AT THE SHATTERED REMAINS OF THE LANCASTER. PIERRE GLANCED AT HIM SYMPATHETICALLY, HIS VOICE WAS GENTLE...
COME, MON AMI, WE CAN DO NO MORE.
THAT IS OUR FARMHOUSE OVER THERE. YOU WILL BE SAFE IN OUR BARN UNTIL THE SUBMARINE COMES FOR MONSIEUR LAFARGE.

STILL FEELING DAZED AND SOMEWHAT BEWILDERED, MIKE STUMBLED ALONG WITH THE TWO BELGIANS. PIERRE LED THE WAY UP A LADDER LEANING AGAINST AN ANCIENT BARN...
YOU WILL REMAIN HERE UNTIL TOMORROW NIGHT.
I AM SORRY WE HAVE NOTHING MORE COMFORTABLE TO OFFER...
TH-THANK YOU, THIS WILL SUIT ME FINE. JUST SO LONG AS I CAN KEEP OUT OF THE NAZIS' HANDS!

EXHAUSTED BY HIS ORDEAL, MIKE LAY ON A PILE OF HAY AND WAS ALMOST INSTANTLY FAST ASLEEP. BUT LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER, HE WAS ROUSED BY THE SOUND OF GUTTURAL VOICES IN THE YARD OUTSIDE.
WHAT THE...? OH, MY STARS! JERRIES! IF THEY COME UP HERE...


FEVERISHLY HE BURROWED DEEP INTO THE HAY, COVERING HIMSELF COMPLETELY. AS HE DID SO, THE GERMAN N.C.O. IN CHARGE HAMMERED IMPATIENTLY ON THE FARMHOUSE DOOR...
WHAT IS WRONG THAT YOU MUST COME WAKING DECENT CITIZENS AT SUCH AN HOUR?
THE BRITISH BOMBER WHICH CRASHED ON THE HILLSIDE... WE ARE SEARCHING FOR SURVIVORS! OPEN THIS DOOR... WE WISH TO COME IN!

MIKE HEARD THE MUFFLED GRATING OF A KEY IN THE LOCK AS JACQUES OPENED THE FARMHOUSE DOOR.
OF WHAT USE IS IT TO LOOK FOR SURVIVORS? THE BOMBER IS BURNT OUT! NO MAN COULD HAVE LIVED IN THOSE FLAMES.
THE CREW COULD HAVE BALED OUT... WE WOULD NOT HAVE SEEN THEM IN THE DARK. CORPORAL, TAKE FRITZ AND SEARCH THE BARN!

MIKE'S HEART SANK AS HE HEARD THE HEAVY THUD OF JACKBOOTED FEET APPROACHING. PIERRE'S VOICE CUT IN...
BUT THERE IS NO ONE HERE, CORPORAL! NOW, IF I WERE YOU...
SILENCE!

A BUCKET CLATTERED ON THE COBBLES OUTSIDE AND THE BARN DOOR CREAKED OPEN...
LOOK IN THE LOFT, FRITZ!
YOU ARE WASTING YOUR TIME... AAH!
HOLD YOUR TONGUE, DOG!

RECOVERING, PIERRE STUMBLED AFTER THE GERMAN... AND MIKE CROUCHED BREATHLESSLY BENEATH THE HAY IN THE LOFT AS FRITZ STARTED PROBING VICIOUSLY ABOUT HIM WITH A PITCHFORK...

METHODICALLY THE GERMAN WORKED HIS WAY ROUND THE LOFT... AND MIKE BIT BACK AN AGONISED GASP OF PAIN AS A PRONG DUG INTO HIS LEG...

WITH AN IRRITABLE CURSE, FRITZ WITHDREW THE PITCHFORK AND DROVE IT INTO ANOTHER PILE OF HAY...
ACH, THERE IS NO ONE HERE. I TOLD THE CORPORAL THE ACCURSED ENGLANDERS MUST HAVE PERISHED AFTER ALL.

STILL GRUMBLING, THE GERMAN CLIMBED DOWN THE RICKETY LADDER, FOLLOWED BY PIERRE BARELY ABLE TO CONCEAL HIS RELIEF...
PHEW! THAT WAS CLOSE!
LATER, WHEN THE GERMANS HAD DEPARTED, PIERRE RETURNED TO THE LOFT AND HELPED MIKE BANDAGE HIS INJURED LEG.

THE REST OF THAT NIGHT AND THE FOLLOWING DAY PASSED PEACEFULLY ENOUGH UNTIL JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT, WHEN JACQUES TOOK MIKE INTO THE FARMHOUSE. A THIRD BELGIAN WAS IN THE BIG KITCHEN...

MONSIEUR LAFARGE, HERE, IS LEAVING FOR ENGLAND TONIGHT.

I HAVE A RENDEZVOUS WITH ONE OF YOUR SUBMARINES... IT IS FIXED FOR ONE HOUR BEFORE DAWN.

WONDERFUL! WE'LL BE BACK IN GOOD OLD BLIGHTY IN TIME FOR SUPPER!

EVEN THOUGH HIS LEG WAS STILL PAINFUL, THE AIRMAN SET OFF IN HIGH SPIRITS WITH THE BELGIAN.

BON VOYAGE, M'SIEURS!

AU REVOIR!

THE MOON WAS HIGH AND MIKE AND LAFARGE MADE GOOD PROGRESS TOWARDS THE COAST UNTIL THEY CAME TO A MAIN ROAD, ONLY THE AIRMAN'S ALERTNESS SAVED THEM FROM DISCOVERY...
LOOK OUT! JERRIES!

THE GERMAN CONVOY PASSED AND MIKE AND LAFARGE DASHED ACROSS THE ROAD...
WE ARE SAFE NOW, MON AMI. THE GERMANS WILL NEVER FIND US IN THESE WOODS.

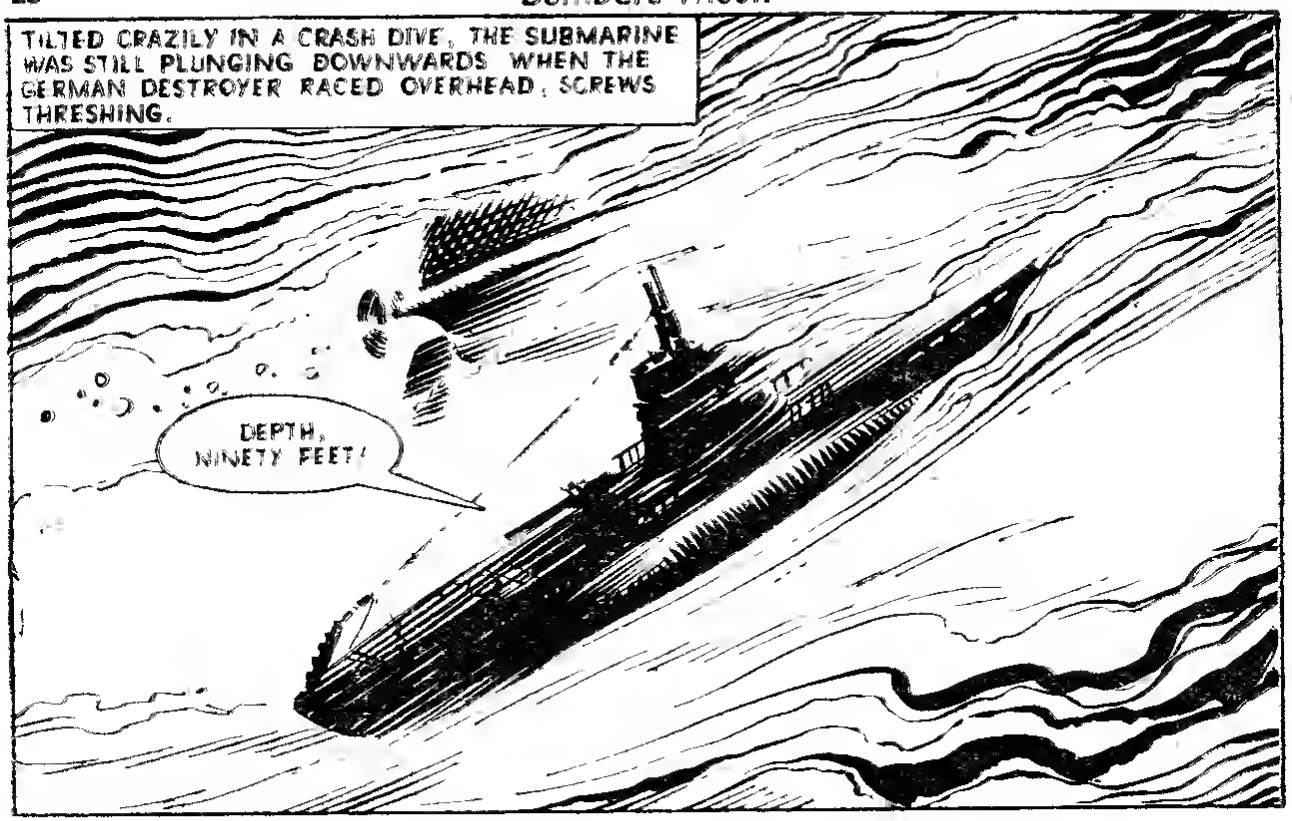
LAFARGE KNEW THE WOODS WELL, AND WITH HIM IN THE LEAD THEY REACHED THEIR RENDEZVOUS WELL BEFORE THE APPOINTED TIME. AT LAST A SLIM BLACK SHAPE ROSE FROM THE MISTY SEA...
THERE SHE IS!

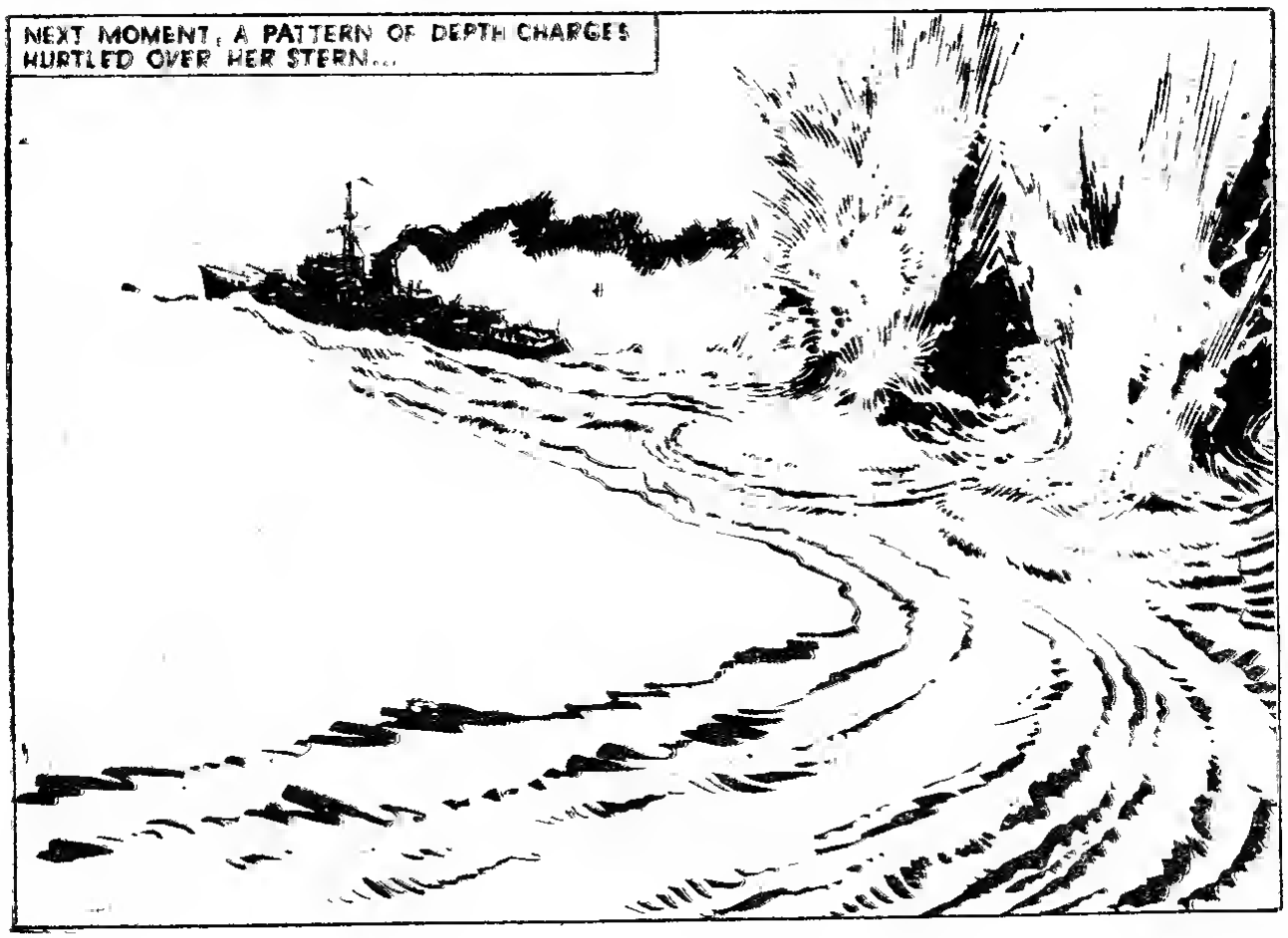
A RUBBER DINGHY PICKED THEM UP FROM THE BEACH AND MIKE WAS HELPED ON TO THE SLIPPERY STEEL HULL OF THE SUBMARINE...
TWO OF THEM?
I'M BRITISH, ... ONLY SURVIVOR FROM A BOMBER WHICH CRASHED NEAR HERE.

THE TWO MEN WERE HUSTLED INTO THE CONNING TOWER, FOR EVERY MOMENT SURFACED WAS A MOMENT OF PERIL FOR THE SUBMARINE.
TAKE HER DOWN TO TWENTY-FIVE FEET! WE'LL STAY THERE UNTIL WE REACH DEEPER WATER.

STILL AT PERISCOPE LEVEL, THE SUBMARINE BEGAN TO HEAD OUT TO SEA. BUT THE SLIM COLUMN STICKING OUT OF THE CHOPPY WATER WAS SIGHTED BY AN ALERT LOOKOUT ON A GERMAN DESTROYER...
PERISCOPE, HERR KAPITAN! PORT BOW!
FULL AHEAD! STAND BY FOR DEPTH CHARGE ATTACK!

AT THE SAME INSTANT, THE SUBMARINE COMMANDER SWUNG ROUND FROM HIS PERISCOPE...
DIVE! DIVE... DIVE! HANG IT! A JERRY DESTROYER!


TILTED CRAZILY IN A CRASH DIVE, THE SUBMARINE WAS STILL PLUNGING DOWNWARDS WHEN THE GERMAN DESTROYER RACED OVERHEAD, SCREWS THRESHING.
DEPTH, NINETY FEET!


NEXT MOMENT, A PATTERN OF DEPTH CHARGES HURTLED OVER HER STERN...

AND DOWN BELOW MIKE WAS HURLED TO THE STEEL DECK AS THE SUBMARINE STAGGERED UNDER A SERIES OF VIOLENT CONCUSSIONS
MY GODFATHERS! WHAT A DIN! GIVE ME THE TAIL END OF A LANC ANY DAY!
THAT WAS PRETTY CLOSE!

ANOTHER BATCH OF DEPTH CHARGES EXPLODED ONE AFTER THE OTHER, THEIR SHOCK WAVES BATTERING AGAINST THE SUBMARINE'S HULL LIKE BLOWS FROM A GIANT HAMMER.

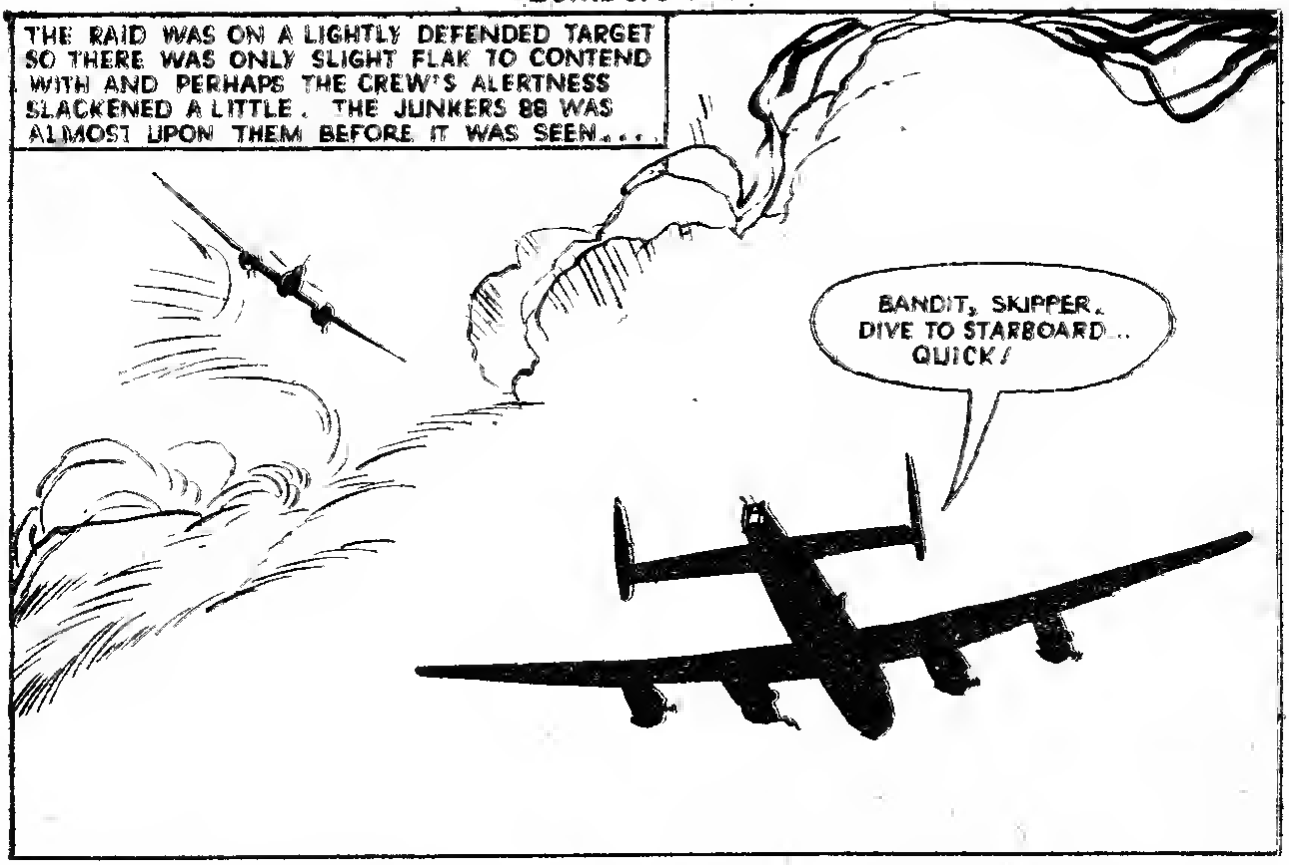
THE SOUND OF THE DESTROYER'S SCREWS BEGAN TO FADE INTO THE DISTANCE AS MIKE PICKED HIMSELF UP. THE AIRMAN BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF.
QUITE A PARTY WHILE IT LASTED!
YOU'RE WELCOME TO THIS JOB, MATE! I'LL STICK TO BOMBERS!

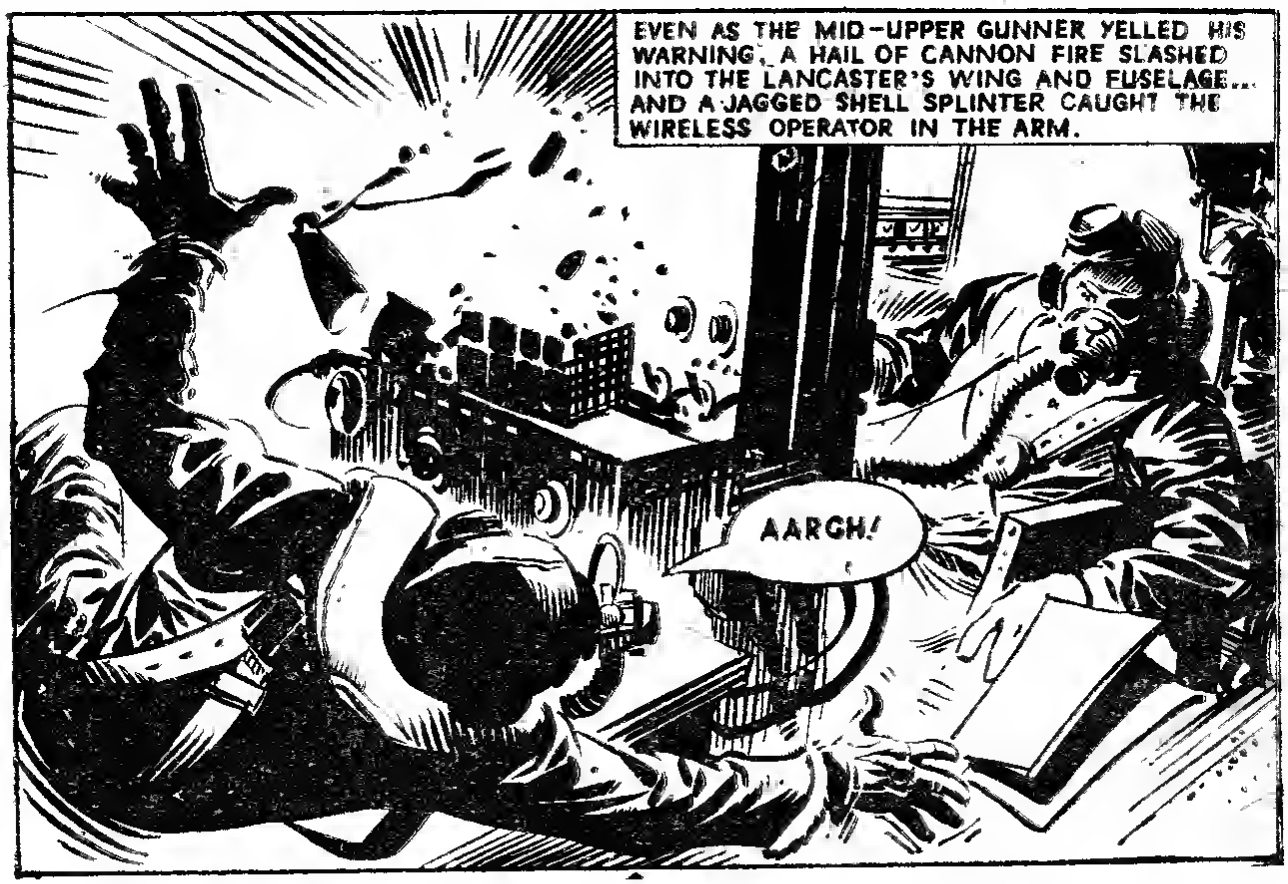
THE GERMAN DESTROYER FAILED TO RENEW CONTACT WITH ITS QUARRY AND SOME HOURS LATER, THE SUBMARINE NOSED INTO HER MOORINGS...
HERE WE ARE... BACK IN GOOD OLD BLIGHTY!

Chapter 3. BANDITS ASTERN

A SHORT SPELL OF WELL-DESERVED LEAVE FOLLOWED FOR MIKE SUTHERLAND BEFORE HE RETURNED TO 1617 SQUADRON... THEN HE WAS POSTED AS TAIL-GUNNER IN A LANCASTER CAPTAINED BY PILOT OFFICER MARKS.

MIKE'S FIRST OPERATIONAL FLIGHT WITH HIS NEW SKIPPER CAME THREE NIGHTS LATER... AND HE FACED IT WITH CONFIDENCE DESPITE HIS TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE IN THE PREVIOUS RAID.

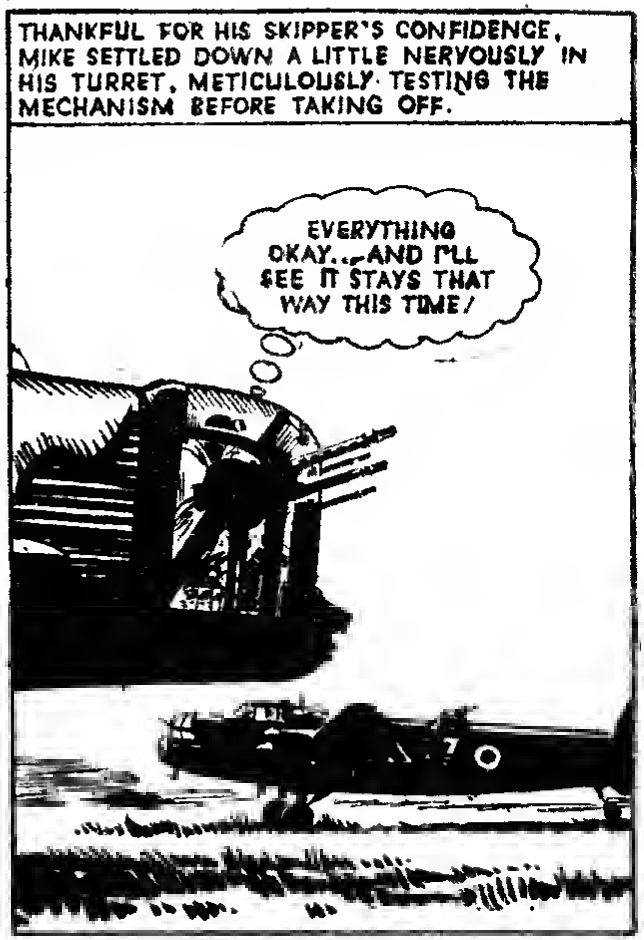

THE RAID WAS ON A LIGHTLY DEFENDED TARGET SO THERE WAS ONLY SLIGHT FLAK TO CONTEND WITH AND PERHAPS THE CREW'S ALERTNESS SLACKENED A LITTLE. THE JUNKERS 88 WAS ALMOST UPON THEM BEFORE IT WAS SEEN....
BANDIT, SKIPPER. DIVE TO STARBOARD... QUICK!

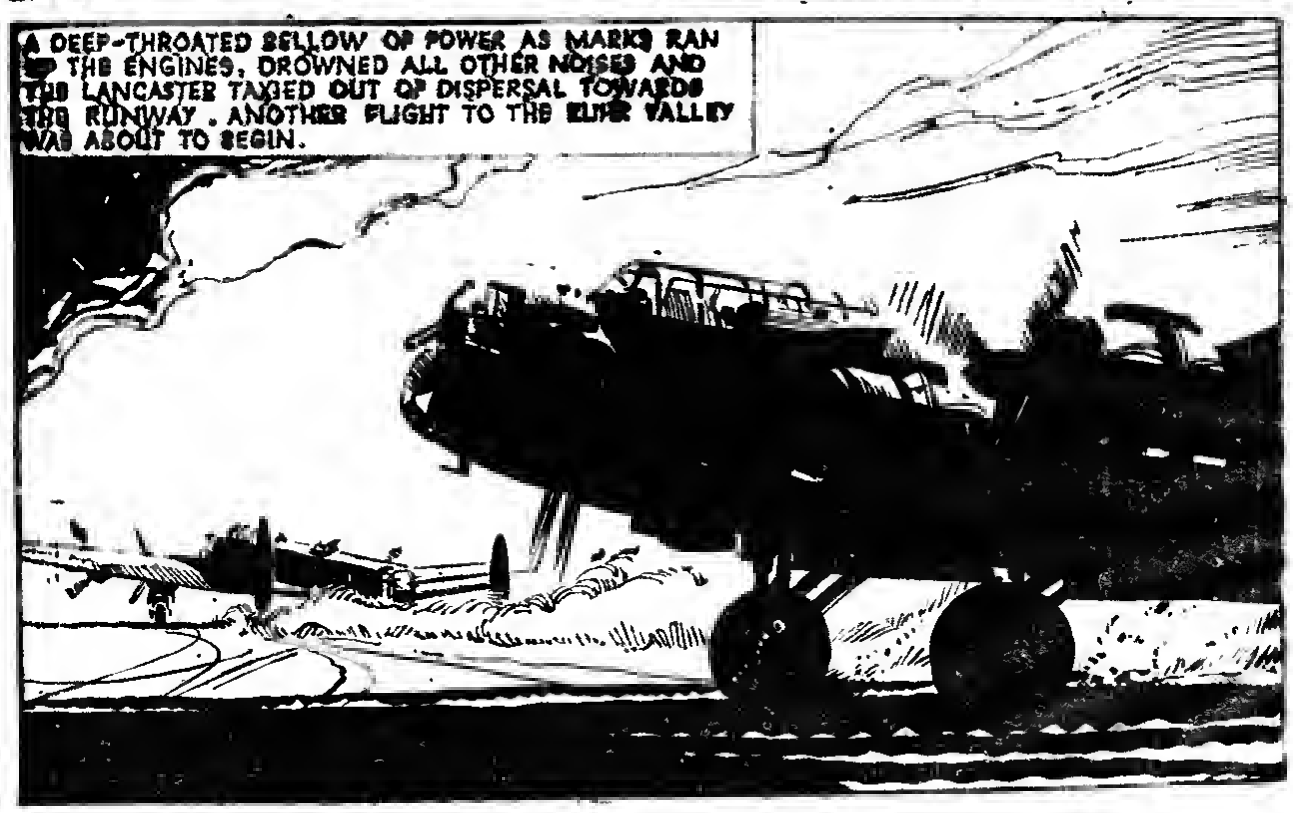

EVEN AS THE MID-UPPER GUNNER YELLED HIS WARNING, A HAIL OF CANNON FIRE SLASHED INTO THE LANCASTER'S WING AND FUSELAGE... AND A JAGGED SHELL SPLINTER CAUGHT THE WIRELESS OPERATOR IN THE ARM.
AARGH!

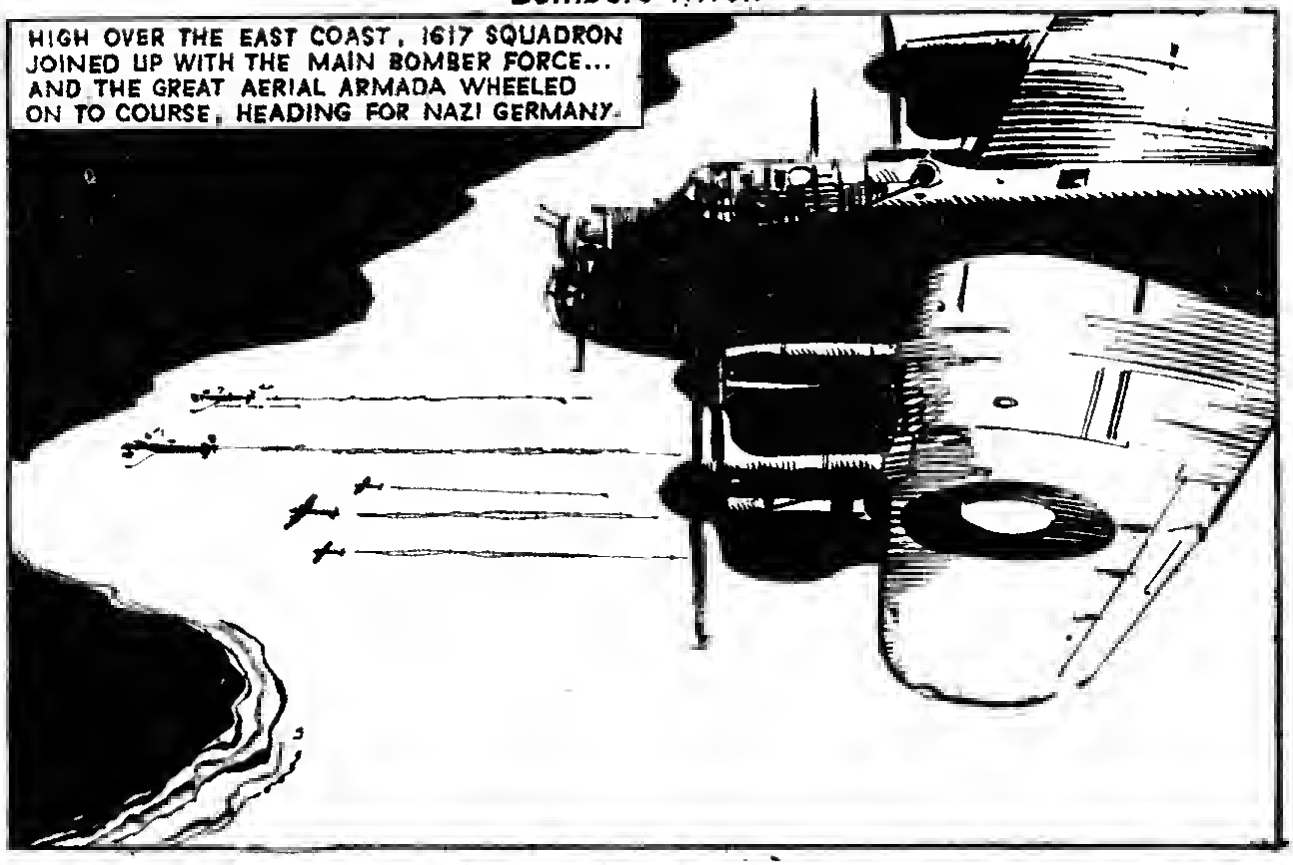
AS THE STRICKEN LANCASTER WALLOWED DRUNKENLY, THE GERMAN FIGHTER CAME UNDER CONCENTRATED FIRE FROM THE REST OF THE BRITISH BOMBERS. GUSHING SMOKE IT FELL AWAY, FOLLOWED BY A BELATED BURST FROM MIKE'S BROWNINGS
SKIPPER TO TAIL-GUNNER! WAKE UP, FOR PETE'S SAKE!
SORRY, SKIPPER! I'LL SEE IT DOESN'T HAPPEN AGAIN!

ALONE IN THE TAIL TURRET, MIKE BERATED HIMSELF AS HE REDOUBLED HIS VIGILANCE...
WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH ME? I SHOULD HAVE SPOTTED THAT BLIGHTER LONG BEFORE HE FIRED... HE MUST HAVE BEEN ALMOST SITTING ON OUR TAIL!

PILOT OFFICER MARKS DID NOT MENTION THE AFFAIR AGAIN... BUT THE REST OF THE CREW WERE NOT SO CONSIDERATE...
LET'S HOPE MIKE DOESN'T LET US DOWN TONIGHT!
HE'D BETTER NOT! WITH THIS MOON, THE JERRY FIGHTERS WILL BE OUT IN FORCE!
GIVE IT A REST, CHAPS! WE'VE GOT A JOB TO DO, AND I'M SURE MIKE WON'T LET US DOWN AGAIN.

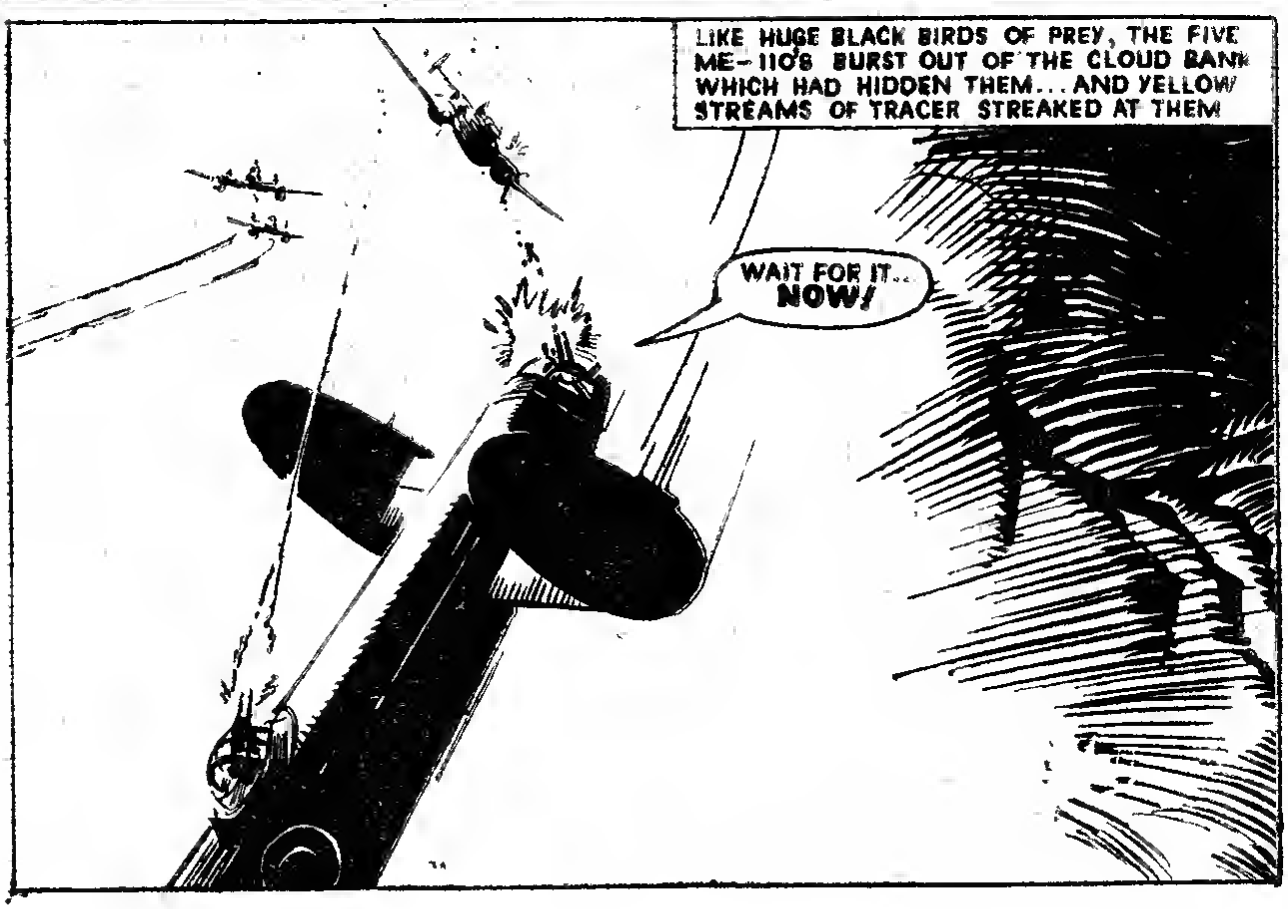

THANKFUL FOR HIS SKIPPER'S CONFIDENCE, MIKE SETTLED DOWN A LITTLE NERVOUSLY IN HIS TURRET, METICULOUSLY TESTING THE MECHANISM BEFORE TAKING OFF.
EVERYTHING OKAY... AND I'LL SEE IT STAYS THAT WAY THIS TIME!

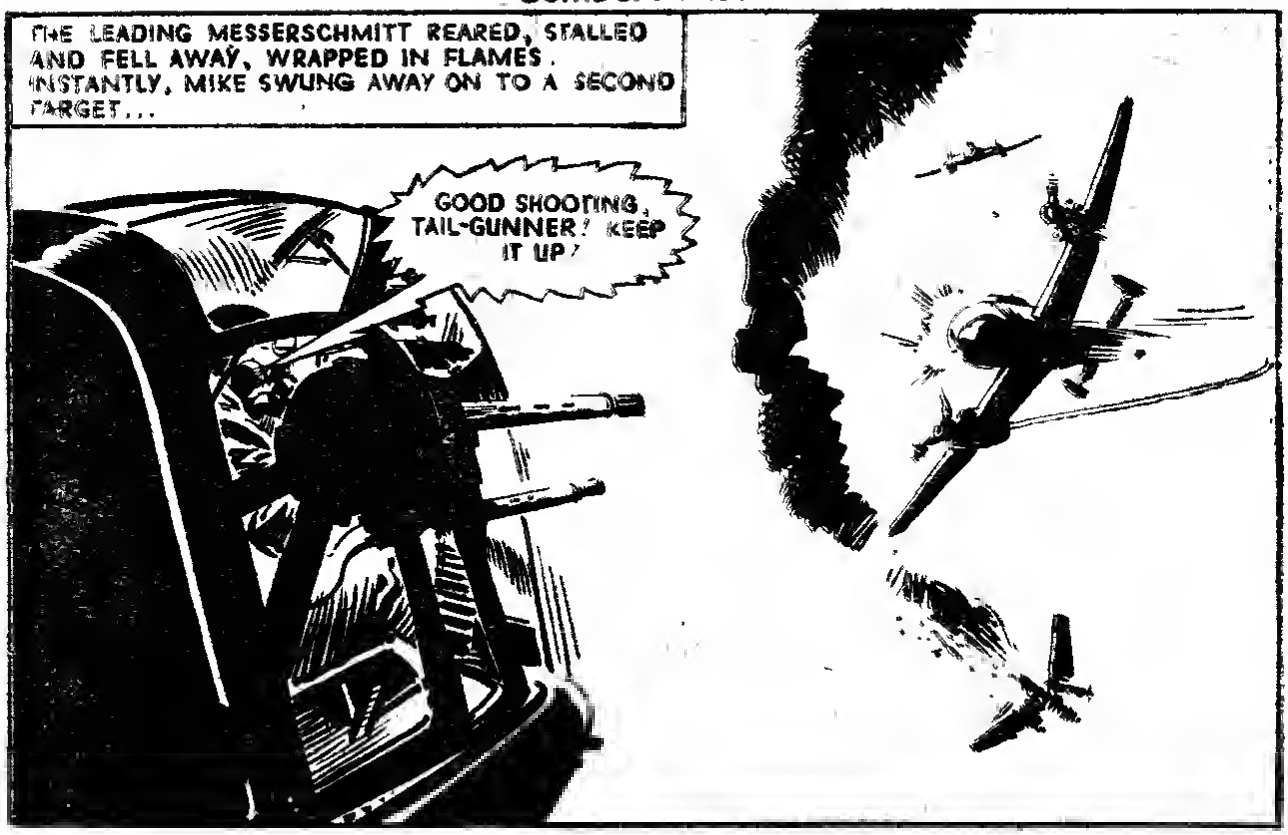

A DEEP-THROATED BELLOW OF POWER AS MARKS RAN UP THE ENGINES, DROWNED ALL OTHER NOISES AND THE LANCASTER TAXIED OUT OF DISPERSAL TOWARDS THE RUNWAY. ANOTHER FLIGHT TO THE RUHR VALLEY WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN.

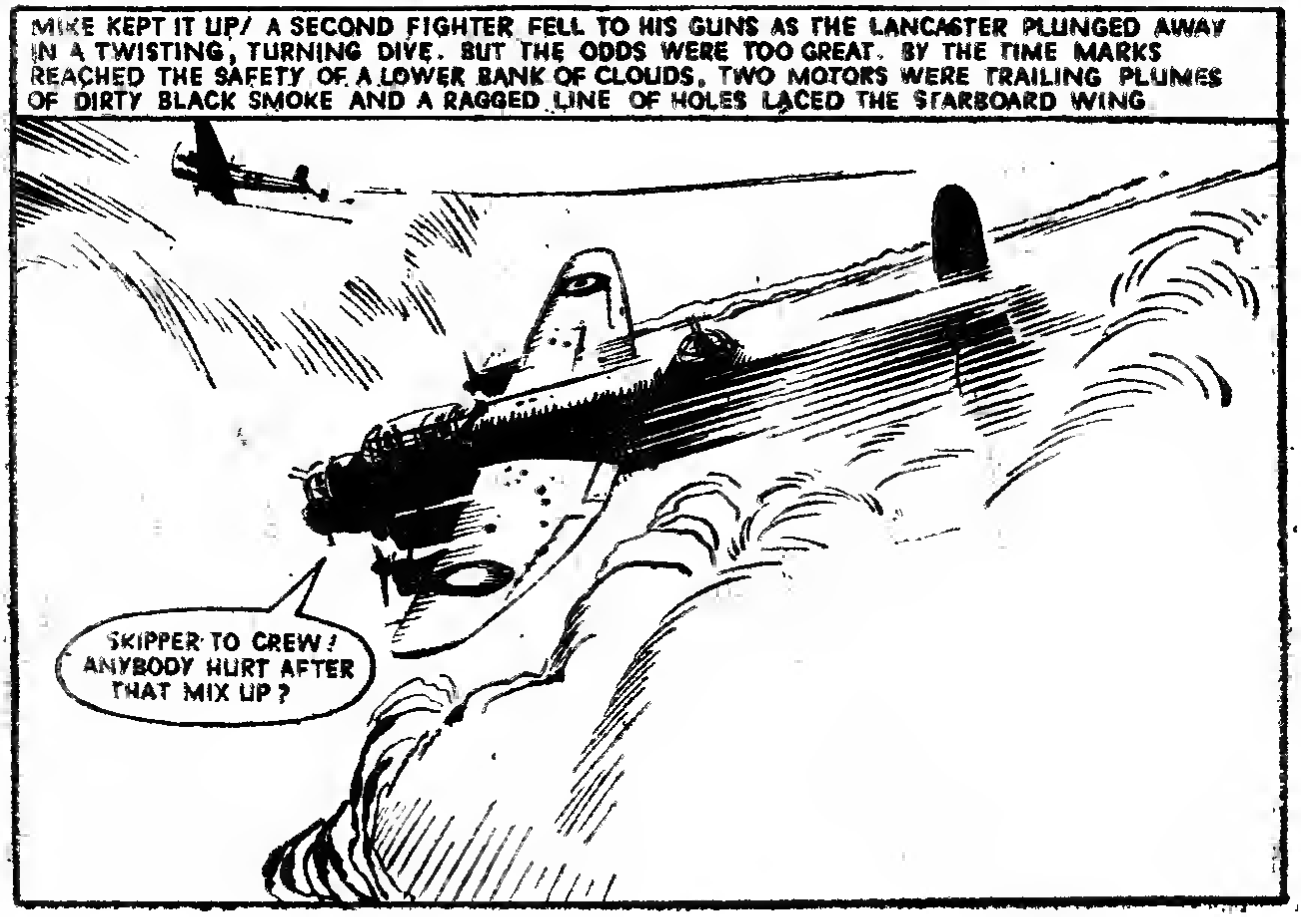

HIGH OVER THE EAST COAST, 1617 SQUADRON JOINED UP WITH THE MAIN BOMBER FORCE... AND THE GREAT AERIAL ARMADA WHEELED ON TO COURSE, HEADING FOR NAZI GERMANY.

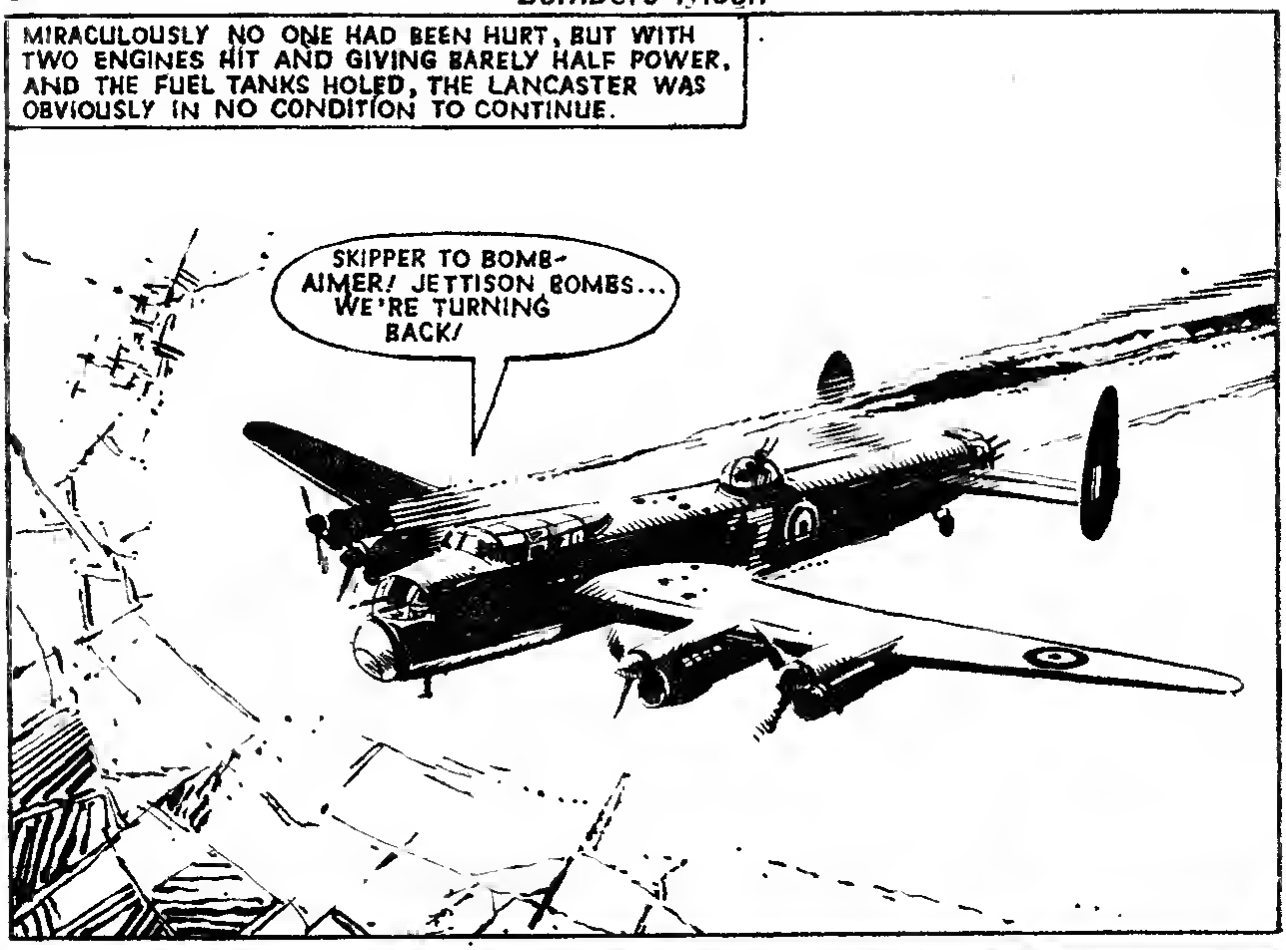
THE LANCASTERS THUNDERED STEADILY EASTWARDS. THE COAST OF HOLLAND APPEARED AND MIKE STARED OUT UNEASILY AT THE MOONLIT PATCHWORK OF BROKEN CLOUD.
TOO MUCH CLOUD COVER — AN IDEAL NIGHT FOR JERRY FIGHTERS!

HIS EYES RAKED THE STAR-STUDDED SKY ABOVE, PROBED THE SILVERY WHITE LAYERS OF CLOUD TO PORT AND STARBOARD. AND THEN HE SAW THEM
BANDITS DEAD ASTERN! FIVE MESSERSCHMITT ONE-ONE-O'S! CORKSCREW, SKIPPER. AND QUICK!
FIVE! WE'RE FOR IT THIS TIME!


LIKE HUGE BLACK BIRDS OF PREY, THE FIVE ME-110'S BURST OUT OF THE CLOUD BANK WHICH HAD HIDDEN THEM... AND YELLOW STREAMS OF TRACER STREAKED AT THEM
WAIT FOR IT... NOW!


THE LEADING MESSERSCHMITT REARED, STALLED AND FELL AWAY, WRAPPED IN FLAMES. INSTANTLY, MIKE SWUNG AWAY ON TO A SECOND TARGET...
GOOD SHOOTING, TAIL-GUNNER! KEEP IT UP!

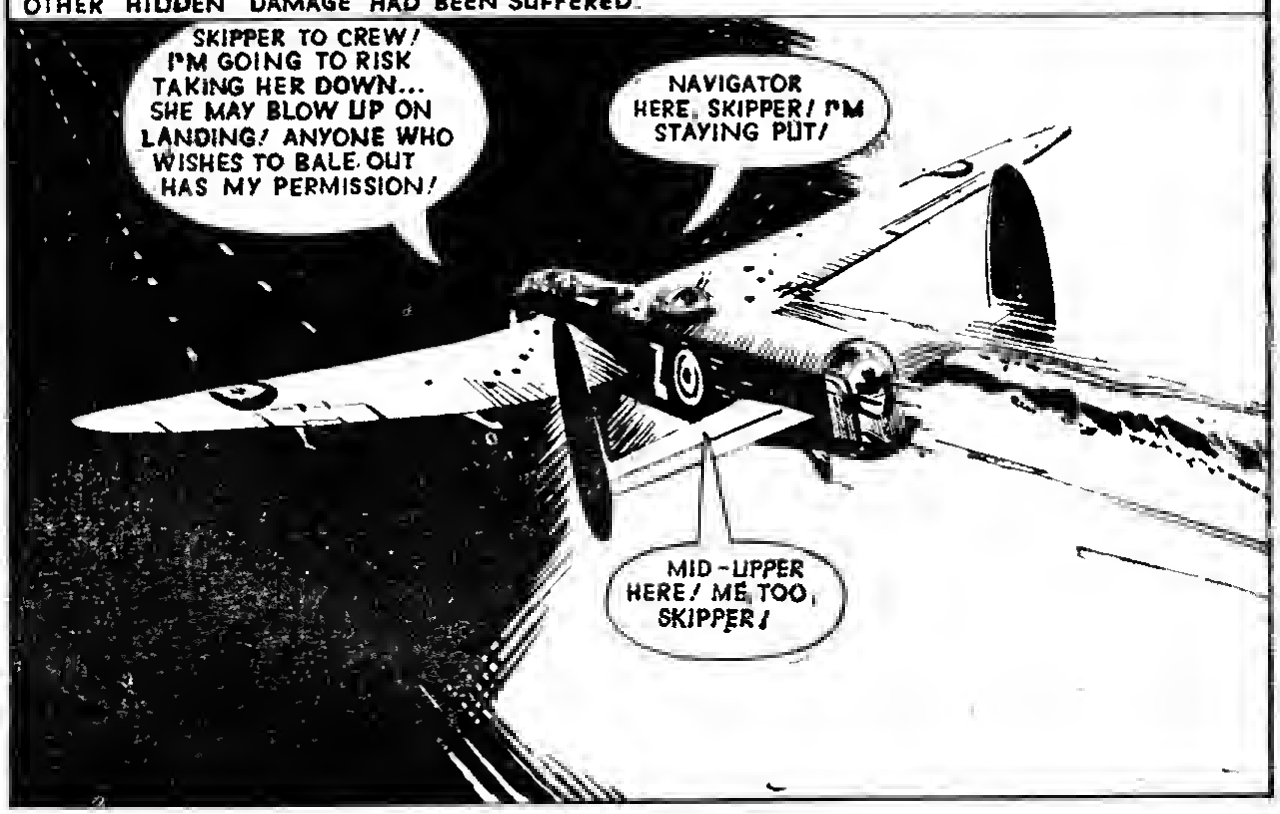

MIKE KEPT IT UP! A SECOND FIGHTER FELL TO HIS GUNS AS THE LANCASTER PLUNGED AWAY IN A TWISTING, TURNING DIVE. BUT THE ODDS WERE TOO GREAT. BY THE TIME MARKS REACHED THE SAFETY OF A LOWER BANK OF CLOUDS, TWO MOTORS WERE TRAILING PLUMES OF DIRTY BLACK SMOKE AND A RAGGED LINE OF HOLES LACED THE STARBOARD WING
SKIPPER TO CREW! ANYBODY HURT AFTER THAT MIX UP?

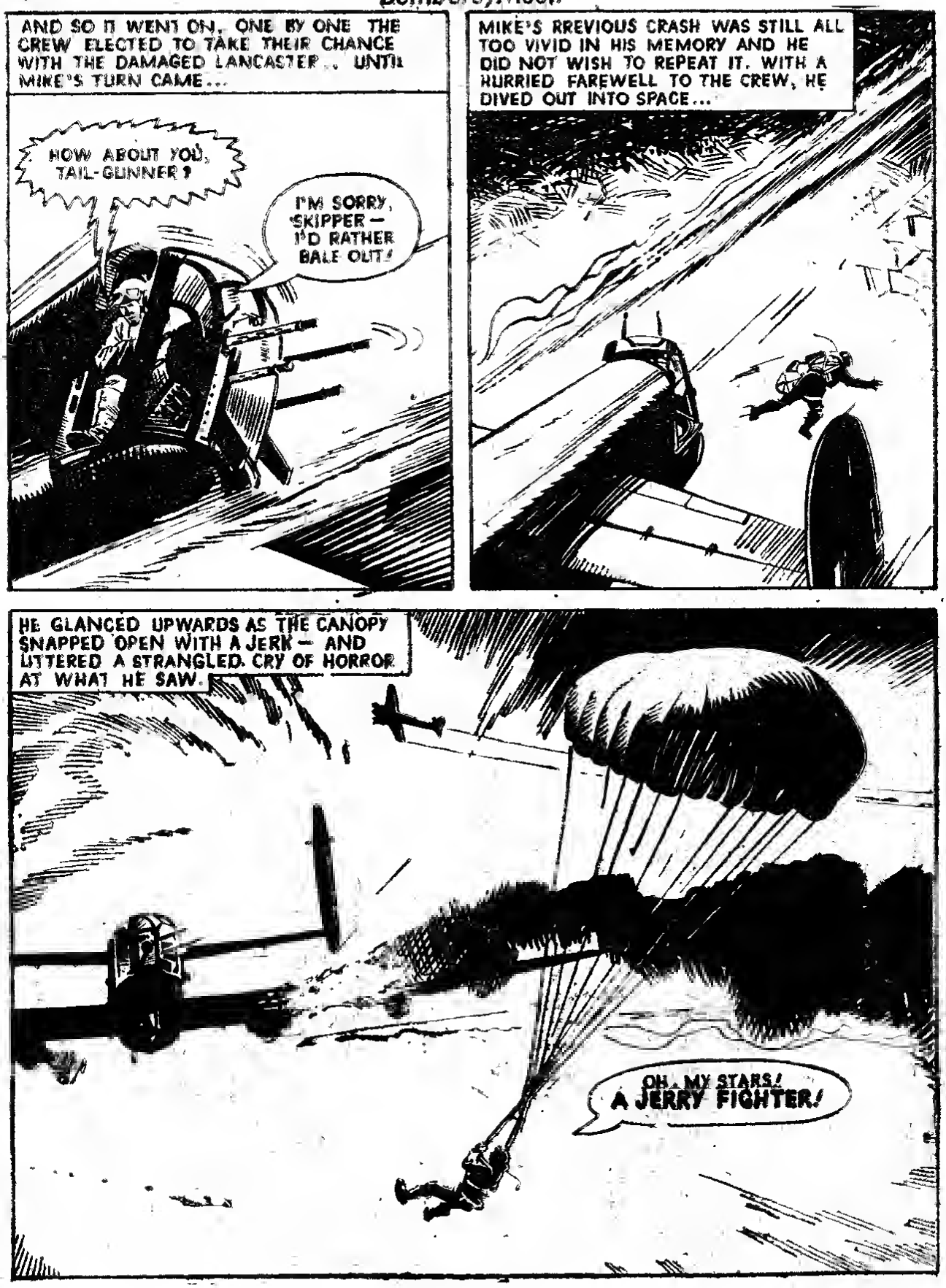

MIRACULOUSLY NO ONE HAD BEEN HURT, BUT WITH TWO ENGINES HIT AND GIVING BARELY HALF POWER, AND THE FUEL TANKS HOLED, THE LANCASTER WAS OBVIOUSLY IN NO CONDITION TO CONTINUE.
SKIPPER TO BOMB-AIMER! JETTISON BOMBS... WE'RE TURNING BACK!

WITH A HOWLING GALE SHRIEKING THROUGH THE TORN FUSELAGE THE LANCASTER TURNED, LIMPING FOR HOME.
THE DUTCH COAST ISN'T FAR, THANK HEAVENS! WITH LUCK, WE MIGHT JUST MAKE IT BACK TO BASE!
PROVIDED THE FUEL HOLDS OUT! WE'VE LOST A LOT!
ONE THING, WE'LL BE AWAY FROM THE FIGHTERS ONCE WE ARE OVER THE SEA.

THE ENGLISH COASTLINE SLID PAST BELOW... AND A COUGHING SPLUTTER FROM THE STARBOARD INNER ENGINE ANNOUNCED THAT THE MAIN FUEL TANKS WERE DRY. MARKS SWITCHED OVER TO THE RESERVE SUPPLY AND THE ENGINE PICKED UP AGAIN.

MARKS NODDED GRIMLY. HE KNEW ONLY TOO WELL THE DANGER OF LANDING WITH A FUSELAGE FULL OF PETROL FUMES. THE SLIGHTEST SPARK AND THE WHOLE MACHINE WOULD BE BLOWN SKY HIGH. ON THE TOP OF THAT HE WAS NOT SURE WHETHER ANY OTHER HIDDEN DAMAGE HAD BEEN SUFFERED.




AND SO IT WENT ON. ONE BY ONE THE CREW ELECTED TO TAKE THEIR CHANCE WITH THE DAMAGED LANCASTER... UNTIL MIKE'S TURN CAME...
HOW ABOUT YOU, TAIL-GUNNER?
I'M SORRY, SKIPPER — I'D RATHER BALE OUT!
MIKE'S PREVIOUS CRASH WAS STILL ALL TOO VIVID IN HIS MEMORY AND HE DID NOT WISH TO REPEAT IT. WITH A HURRIED FAREWELL TO THE CREW, HE DIVED OUT INTO SPACE...
HE GLANCED UPWARDS AS THE CANOPY SNAPPED OPEN WITH A JERK — AND UTTERED A STRANGLED CRY OF HORROR AT WHAT HE SAW.
OH, MY STARS! A JERRY FIGHTER!

LIKE SOME MONSTROUS BAT IN THE NIGHT SKY, THE JUNKERS 88 DROPPED TOWARDS ITS UNSUSPECTING VICTIM SILHOUETTED AGAINST THE FLARE PATH.
ACH! THE FOOLS HAVE NOT SEEN US! THIS WILL BE EASY!

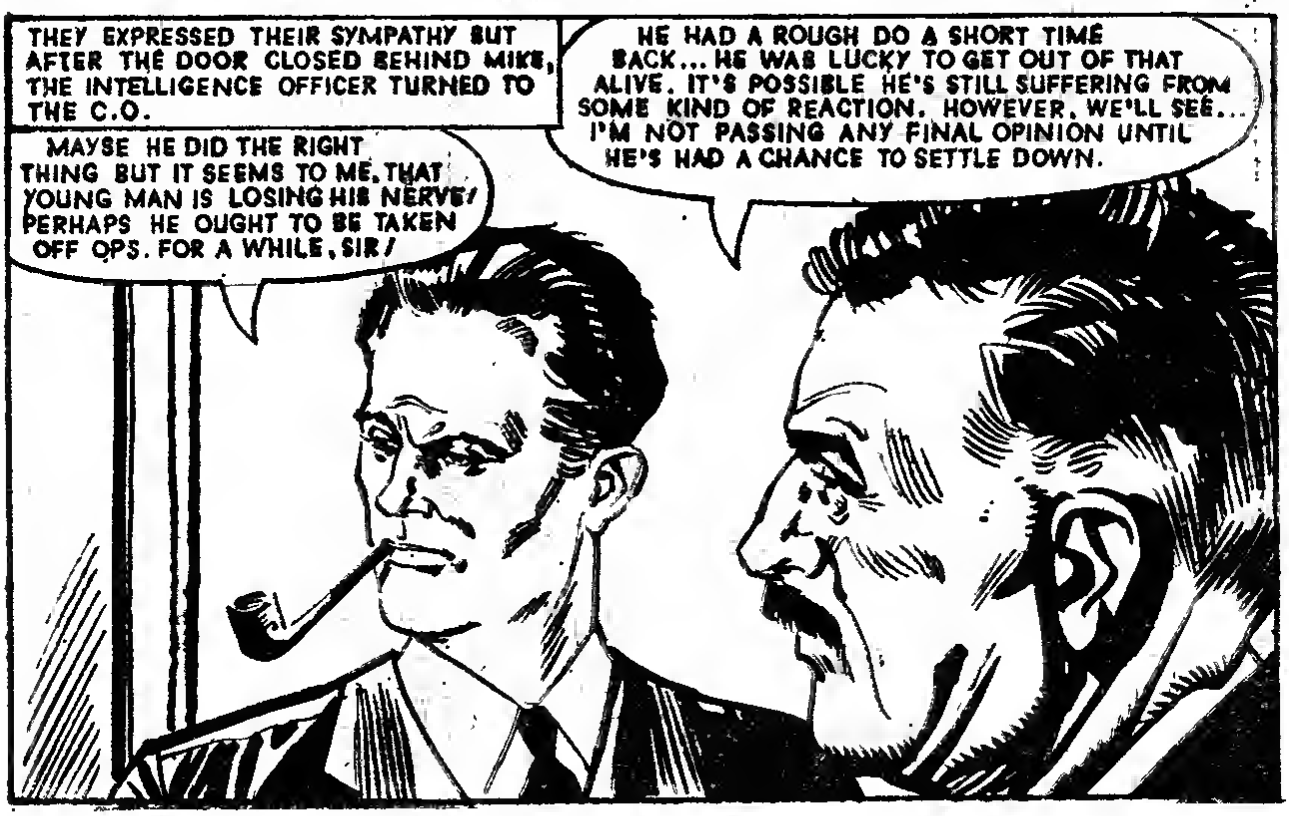
MIKE WATCHED AGHAST AS THE JUNKERS CLOSED IN FOR THE KILL.
OH.. WHY DIDN'T I STAY ABOARD ? I MIGHT HAVE SPOTTED HIM FROM THE TAIL POSITION... BUT THE OTHERS HAVEN'T A HOPE!

IN THAT MOMENT MIKE WOULD HAVE GIVEN ANYTHING TO BE BACK IN THE CRIPPLED BOMBER. JUST AS MARKS LOWERED THE FLAPS AND UNDERCARRIAGE, A RIPPLING FLASH OF CRIMSON TRACER BRIDGED THE GAP BETWEEN JUNKERS AND LANCASTER.

NEXT MOMENT, THE LANCASTER ERUPTED IN A SHEET OF EYE-SEARING FLAME AS A HAIL OF CANNON SHELLS TORE INTO THE FUME-FILLED FUSELAGE...
AAGH!

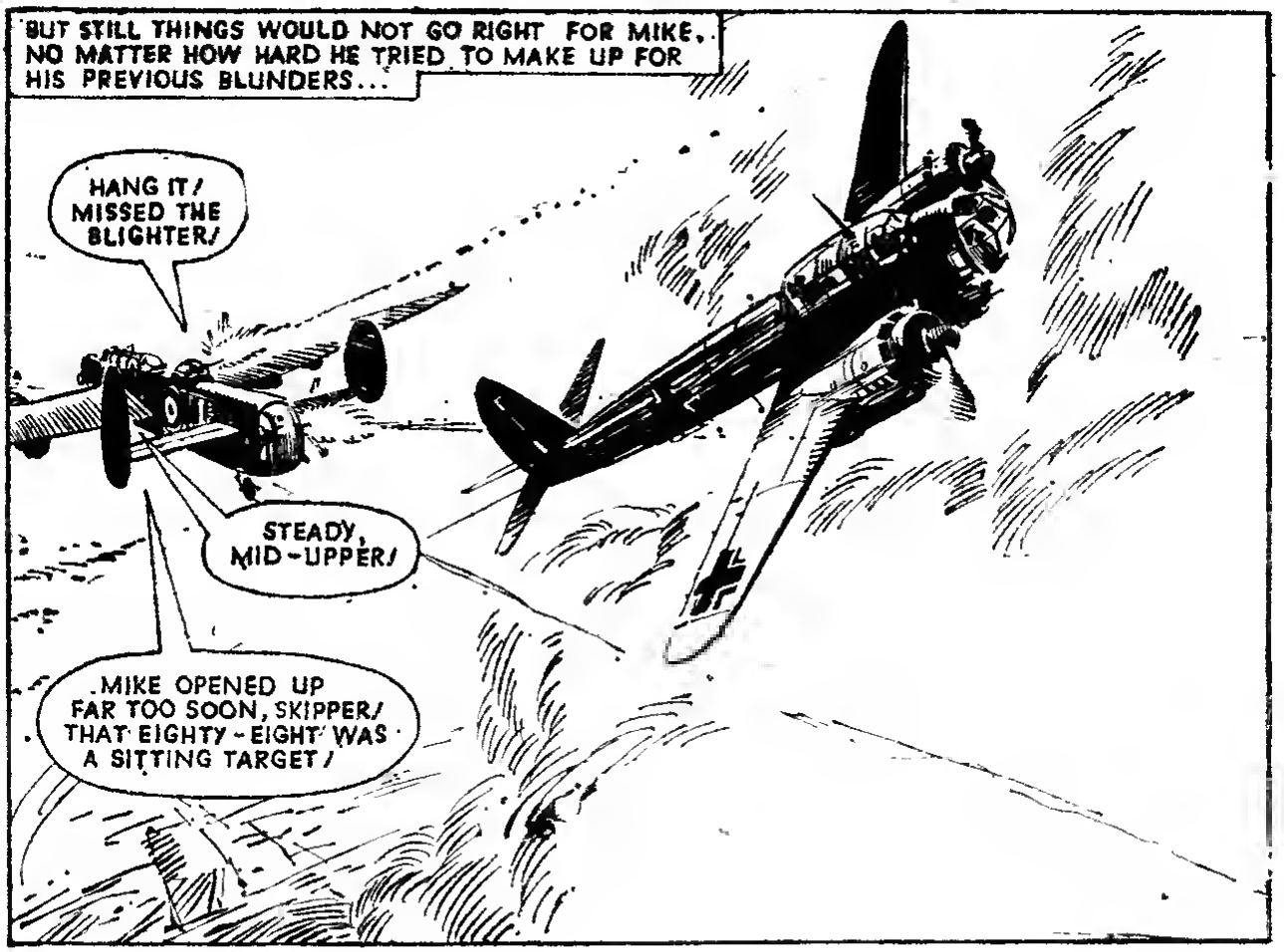
SHOCKED BY THE HORROR OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED, MIKE WAS HARDLY AWARE OF THE FIGURES RUNNING TOWARDS HIM. HE MUMBLED DAZEDLY TO HIMSELF AS THEY HELPED HIM TO HIS FEET...
IF ONLY I'D STAYED ON — IT — IT MIGHT NOT HAVE HAPPENED!

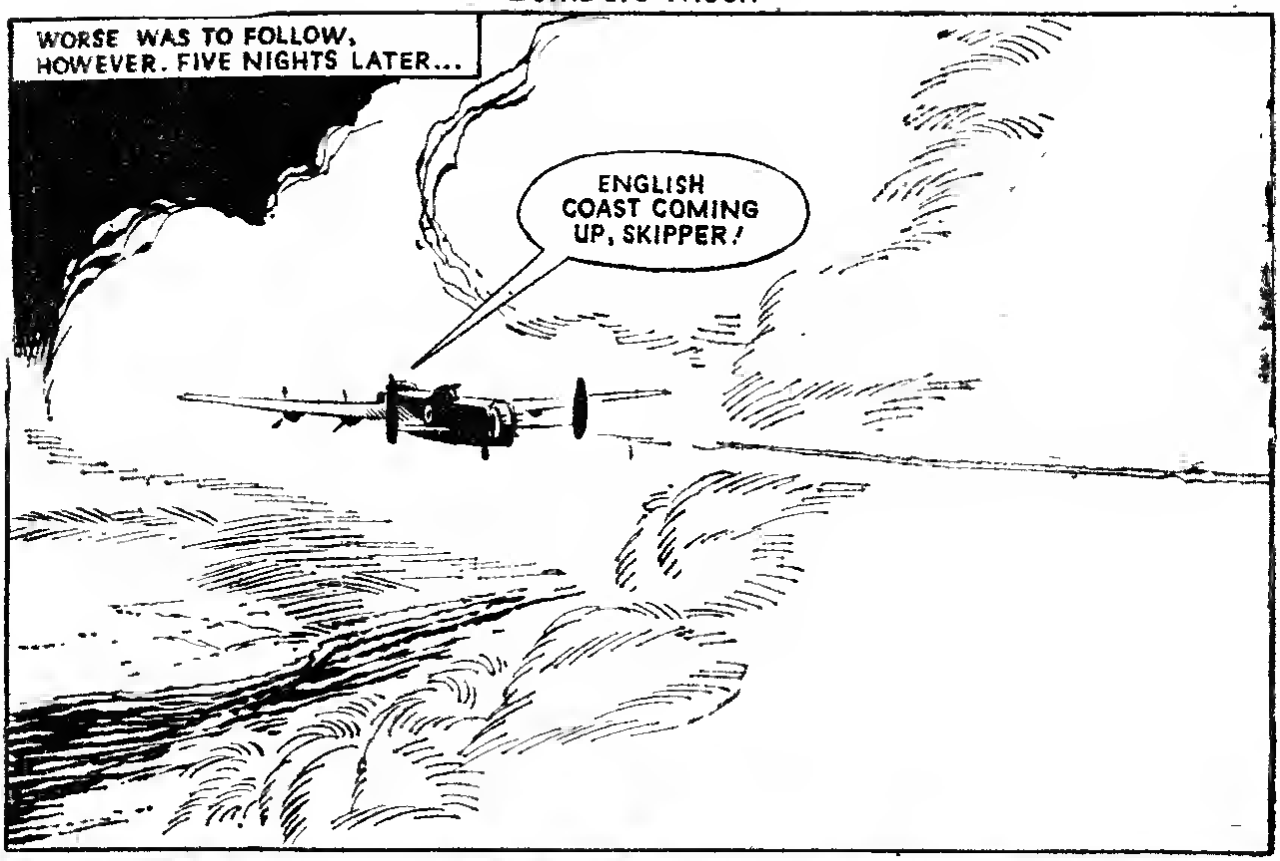
IN THE BRIEFING ROOM, THE STATION COMMANDER AND THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER LISTENED IN SILENCE TO HIS REPORT...
FIGHTERS GOT US JUST AFTER WE CROSSED THE DUTCH COAST, SIR. WE JETTISONED OUR BOMBS AND TURNED FOR HOME, BUT THEY'D HOLED THE FUEL TANKS... THE FUSELAGE WAS FULL OF FUMES. SKIPPER GAVE PERMISSION TO BALE OUT... BUT THE OTHER CHAPS PREFERRED TO STAY WITH THE KITE...


THEY EXPRESSED THEIR SYMPATHY BUT AFTER THE DOOR CLOSED BEHIND MIKE, THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER TURNED TO THE C.O.
HE HAD A ROUGH DO A SHORT TIME BACK... HE WAS LUCKY TO GET OUT OF THAT ALIVE. IT'S POSSIBLE HE'S STILL SUFFERING FROM SOME KIND OF REACTION. HOWEVER, WE'LL SEE... I'M NOT PASSING ANY FINAL OPINION UNTIL HE'S HAD A CHANCE TO SETTLE DOWN.
MAYBE HE DID THE RIGHT THING BUT IT SEEMS TO ME, THAT YOUNG MAN IS LOSING HIS NERVE! PERHAPS HE OUGHT TO BE TAKEN OFF OPS. FOR A WHILE, SIR!

Chapter 4. LAST CHANCE

THORNTON WAS SYMPATHETIC TOWARDS THE YOUNG GUNNER, BUT MIKE WAS NOT DECEIVED. HE KNEW ONLY TOO WELL WHAT THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE FLIGHT LIEUTENANT'S CREW WERE THINKING...
THEY DON'T TRUST ME. BUT I'LL SHOW THEM... SEE IF I DON'T!


BUT STILL THINGS WOULD NOT GO RIGHT FOR MIKE, NO MATTER HOW HARD HE TRIED TO MAKE UP FOR HIS PREVIOUS BLUNDERS...
HANG IT! MISSED THE BLIGHTER!
STEADY, MID-UPPER!
MIKE OPENED UP FAR TOO SOON, SKIPPER! THAT EIGHTY-EIGHT WAS A SITTING TARGET!


WORSE WAS TO FOLLOW, HOWEVER. FIVE NIGHTS LATER...
ENGLISH COAST COMING UP, SKIPPER!

SECONDS LATER, A SHADOW LOOMED OUT OF THE DARKNESS... A STUBBY-NOSED MACHINE, WITH LONG ENGINE NACELLES. IN AN INSTANT, MIKE HAD LINED UP HIS SIGHTS...
JUNKERS... THREE O'CLOCK, HIGH!

AS THE LANCASTER SHOOK TO THE RATTLE OF GUNS, THORNTON JERKED THE STICK SAVAGELY ACROSS AND STOOD ON THE RUDDER IN AN EFFORT TO SPOIL HIS GUNNER'S AIM...

MID-UPPER! YOU RAVING IDIOT! WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE PLAYING AT? THAT'S A BEAUFIGHTER!

BY THAT TIME MIKE HAD HIMSELF REALISED HIS MISTAKE. MISERABLY, HE SLUMPED OVER HIS GUNS AS THE BEAUFIGHTER VEERED WILDLY AWAY.

OF ALL THE HAREBRAINED, SENSELESS CLOTS! THANK HEAVENS I DIDN'T HIT IT!

AND SOME HOURS LATER, IN THE C.O.'S OFFICE...

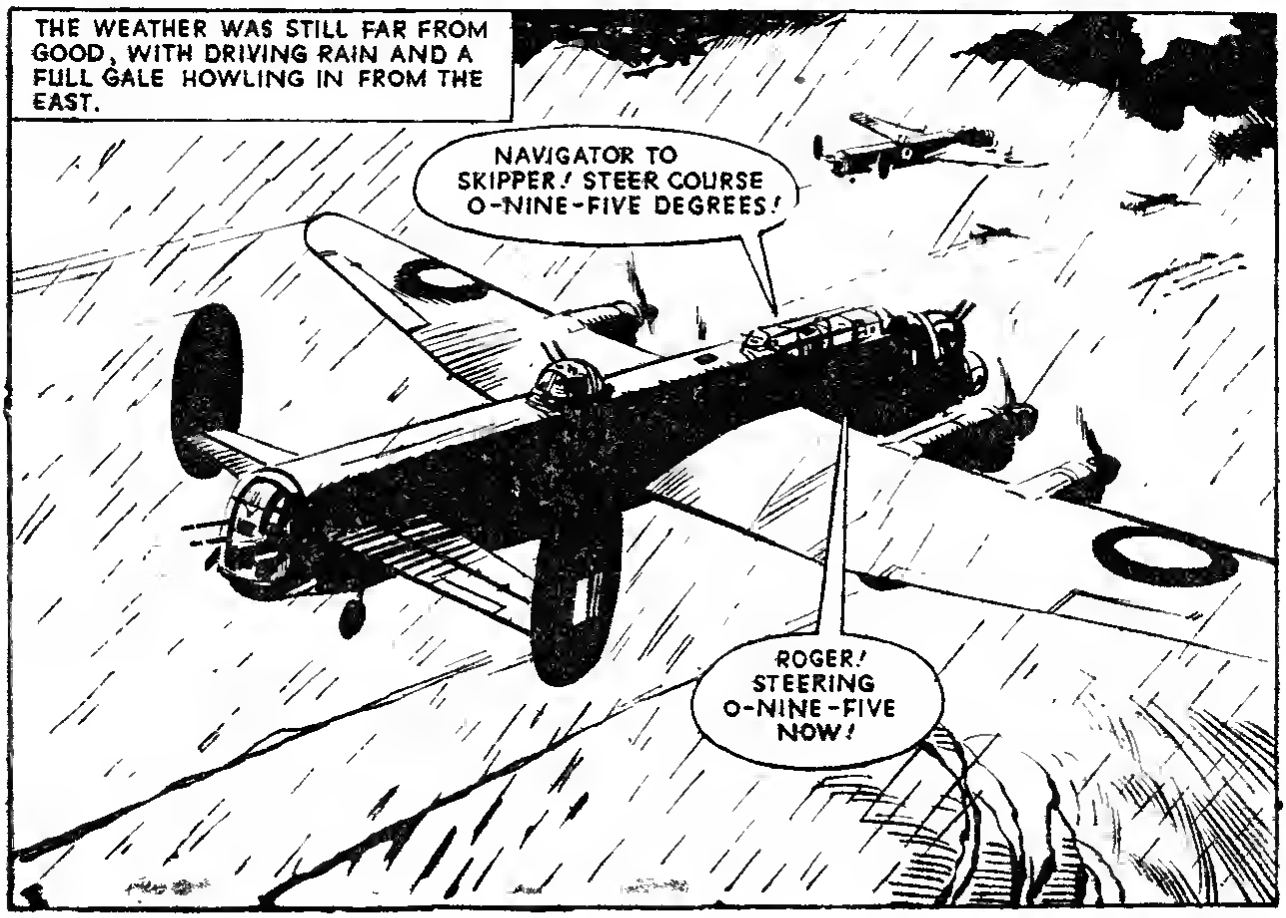
I'M AFRAID THIS IS THE FINISH... SUTHERLAND WILL HAVE TO BE GROUNDED! HE'S OBVIOUSLY LOST HIS NERVE... AND I'M NOT SURPRISED AFTER WHAT HE'S BEEN THROUGH. BUT WE SIMPLY CAN'T RISK ANOTHER BOOB LIKE TONIGHT'S.

I'M NOT SO SURE, SIR... ABOUT SUTHERLAND HAVING LOST HIS NERVE, I MEAN...

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT THORNTON WENT ON TO EXPLAIN ...
HE'S MADE ONE OR TWO BLUNDERS RECENTLY, I'LL ADMIT, BUT I THINK IT'S MERELY BECAUSE HE'S TRYING TOO HARD! HE KNOWS EVERYONE BELIEVES HE'S FINISHED AS AN AIR GUNNER, AND IN TRYING TO PROVE HE ISN'T, HE'S OVERDOING THINGS A BIT. I WISH YOU'D GIVE HIM JUST ONE MORE CHANCE, SIR!
HMM! WELL, ALL RIGHT, THORNTON. BUT ON YOUR OWN HEAD BE IT!

FOR THE NEXT FOUR NIGHTS THE SQUADRON WAS GROUNDED BY BAD WEATHER, BUT ON THE MORNING OF THE FIFTH DAY...
GLAD TO SEE THE WEATHER'S SHOWING SIGNS OF IMROVING. MY CHAPS WERE GETTING PRETTY FED UP WITH IT... THEY'RE KEEN TO GET ON WITH THE JOB!
YOU'RE GOING TO NEED ALL YOUR KEENNESS TONIGHT! THERE'S A RAID LAID ON... AND IT'S TO BE ON ONE OF THE MOST HEAVILY DEFENDED TARGETS IN THE RUHR VALLEY... YOU KNOWN WHAT THAT MEANS!

THAT NIGHT, AS DARKNESS CLOSED OVER THE AIRFIELD, THE C.O. STOOD WATCHING WITH SET FACE AS THE LANCASTERS OF 1617 SQUADRON THUNDERED DOWN THE RUNWAY, TO LIFT ONE BY ONE INTO THE GREY, SWIRLING CURTAIN OF RAIN...
THEY'RE ALL AWAY... BUT HOW MANY WILL COME BACK?

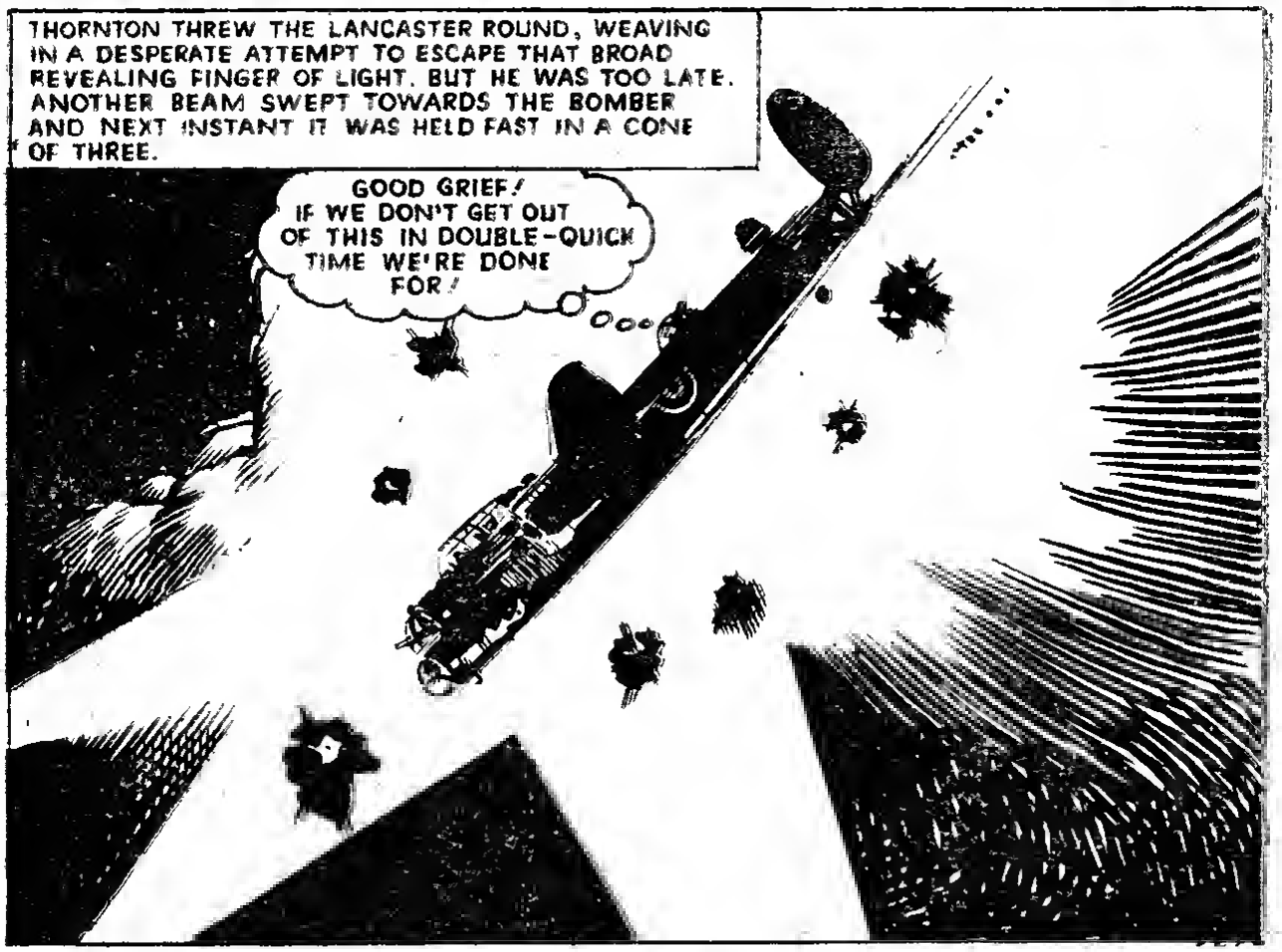

THE WEATHER WAS STILL FAR FROM GOOD, WITH DRIVING RAIN AND A FULL GALE HOWLING IN FROM THE EAST.
NAVIGATOR TO SKIPPER! STEER COURSE O-NINE-FIVE DEGREES!
ROGER! STEERING O-NINE-FIVE NOW!

AT 20,000 FEET THE LANCASTERS SWUNG ON TO COURSE, HEADING INTO THE THICK BLANKET OF CLOUD OVER EUROPE.
AT LEAST WE SHAN'T BE BOTHERED BY JERRY FIGHTERS WITH ALL THAT CLOUD ABOUT.

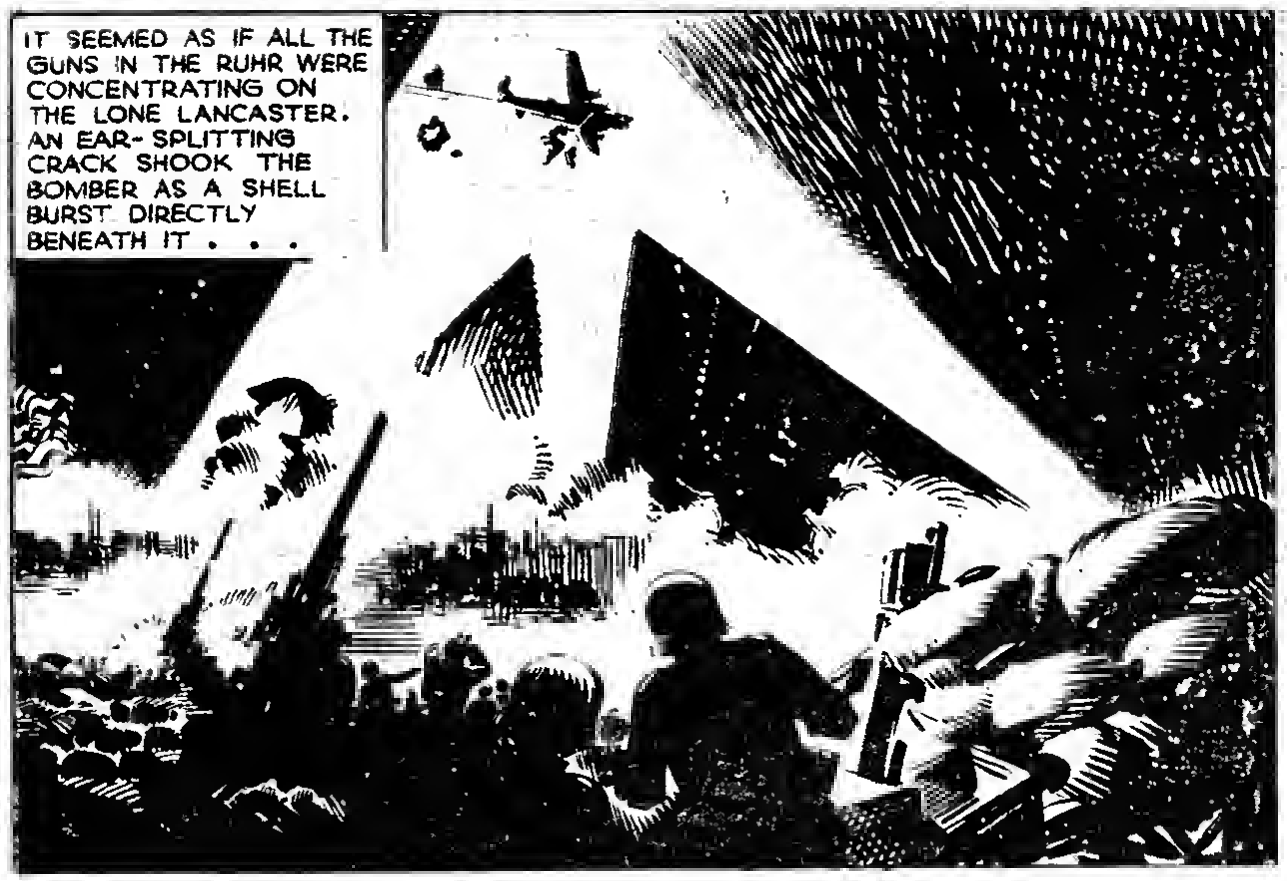
THE CLOUD LAYER DID NOT EXTEND FAR INTO GERMANY, HOWEVER. OVER THE TARGET AREA THEY CAME OUT INTO CLEAR SKIES, WITH ONLY INTERMITTENT PATCHES OF CLOUD.
RIGHT, BOMB-AIMER... SHE'S ALL YOURS!
ROGER, SKIPPER! BOMB DOORS OPEN!

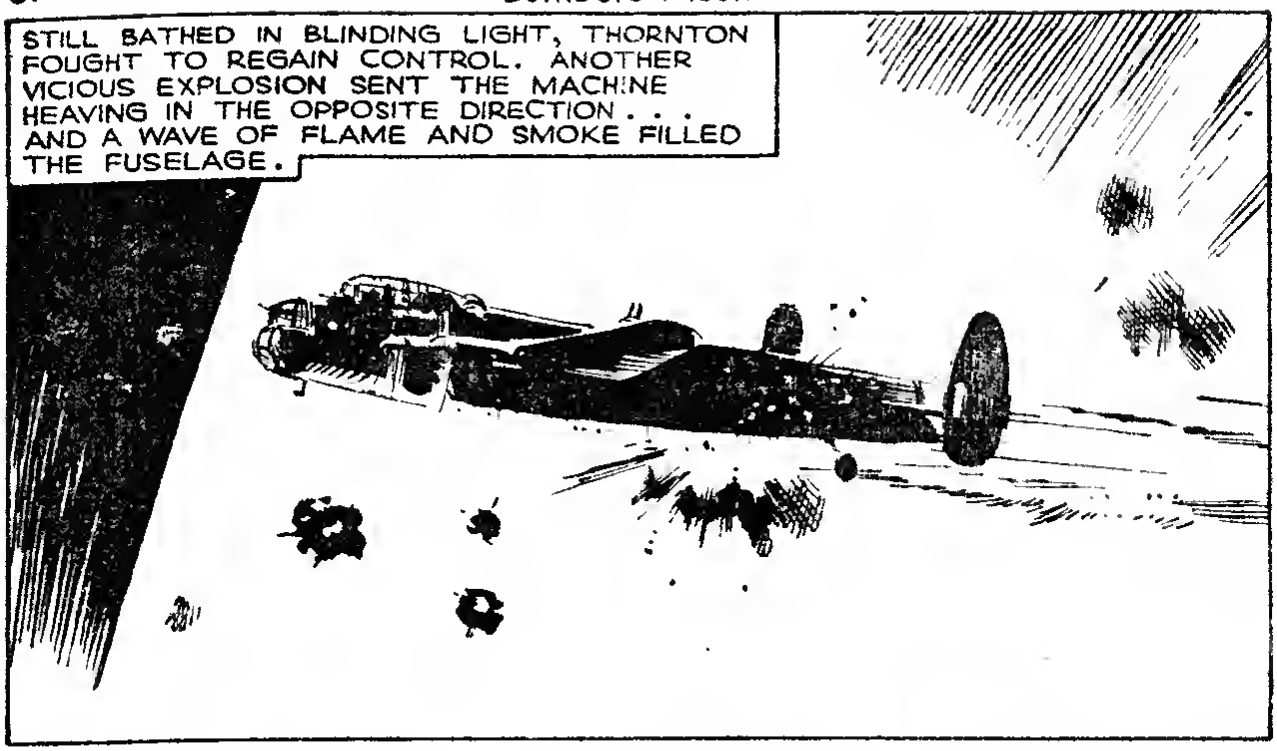
BRACKETED BY BURSTING ACK-ACK SHELLS, THORNTON STROVE TO HOLD THE ROCKING, HEAVING BOMRER STEADY...
STEADY, SKIPPER. HOLD IT! HOLD IT... BOMBS GONE!

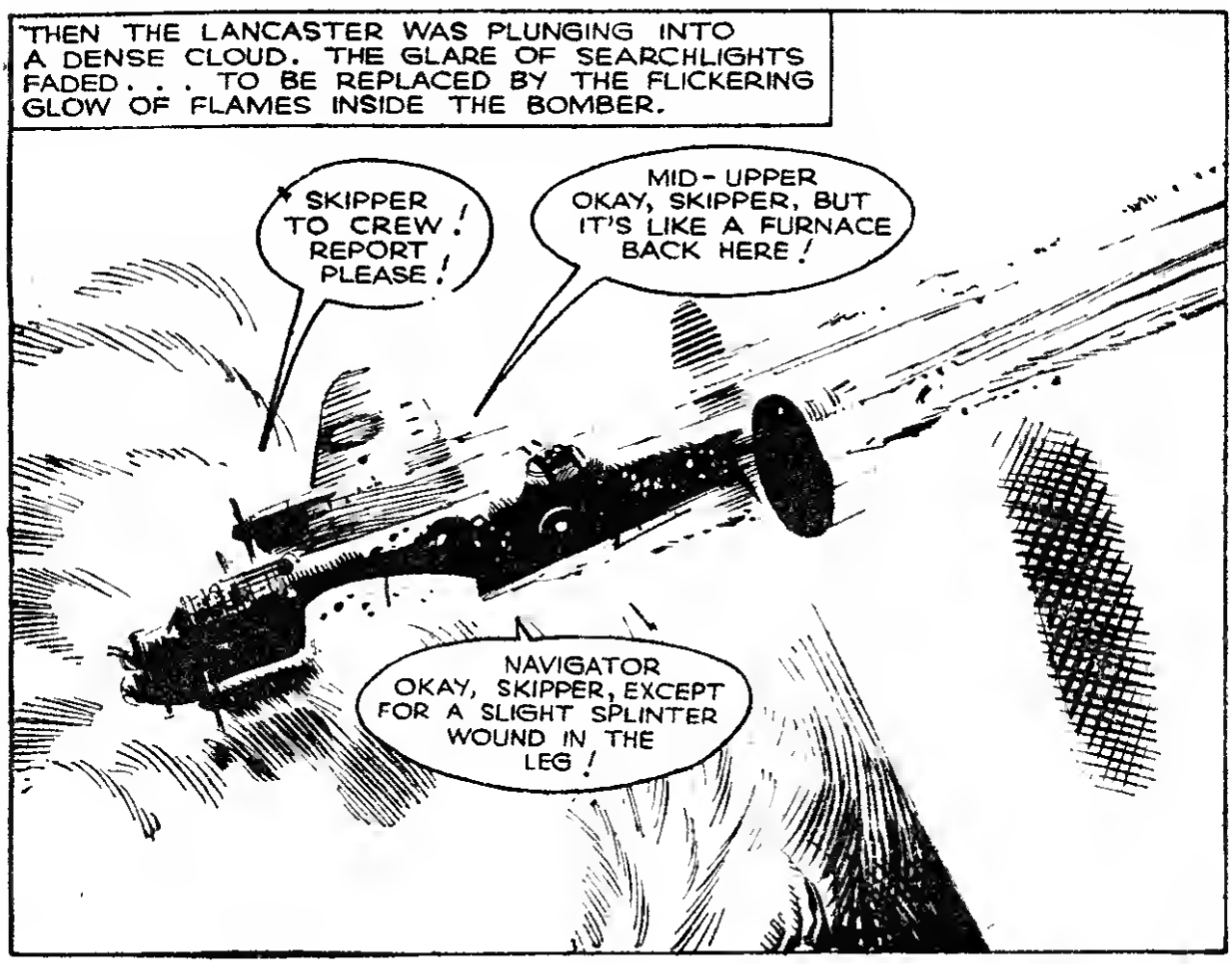
EVEN AS THE BOMB-AIMER PRESSED THE BUTTON, MIKE WAS HALF-BLINDED BY A BRILLIANT WHITE GLARE AS THE PROBING BEAM OF A SEARCHLIGHT FOUND THE LANCASTER


THORNTON THREW THE LANCASTER ROUND, WEAVING IN A DESPERATE ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE THAT BROAD REVEALING FINGER OF LIGHT. BUT HE WAS TOO LATE. ANOTHER BEAM SWEPT TOWARDS THE BOMBER AND NEXT INSTANT IT WAS HELD FAST IN A CONE OF THREE.
GOOD GRIEF! IF WE DON'T GET OUT OF THIS IN DOUBLE-QUICK TIME WE'RE DONE FOR!

BUT TRY AS HE MIGHT, THORNTON COULD NOT ESCAPE FROM THE DEADLY GLARE. STEEL SPLINTERS FROM RADAR-PREDICTED FLAK SLICED THROUGH THE FUSELAGE. THE DIN WAS APPALLING . . .
WE'RE REALLY CATCHING A PACKET THIS TIME!

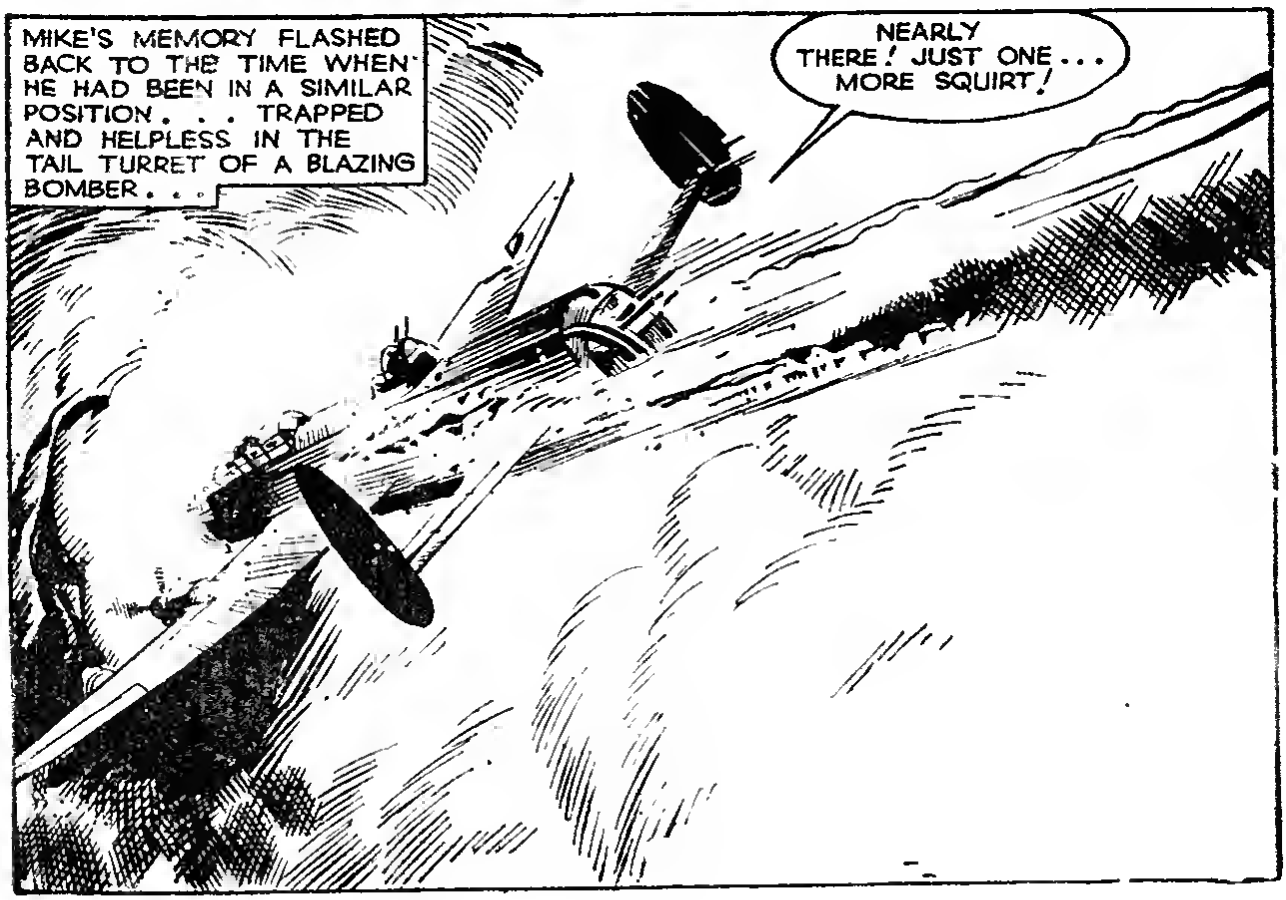

IT SEEMED AS IF ALL THE GUNS IN THE RUHR WERE CONCENTRATING ON THE LONE LANCASTER. AN EAR-SPLITTING CRACK SHOOK THE BOMBER AS A SHELL BURST DIRECTLY BENEATH IT . . .


STILL BATHED IN BLINDING LIGHT, THORNTON FOUGHT TO REGAIN CONTROL. ANOTHER VICIOUS EXPLOSION SENT THE MACHINE HEAVING IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION . . . AND A WAVE OF FLAME AND SMOKE FILLED THE FUSELAGE.


THEN THE LANCASTER WAS PLUNGING INTO A DENSE CLOUD. THE GLARE OF SEARCHLIGHTS FADED . . . TO BE REPLACED BY THE FLICKERING GLOW OF FLAMES INSIDE THE BOMBER.
SKIPPER TO CREW! REPORT PLEASE!
MID-UPPER OKAY, SKIPPER, BUT IT'S LIKE A FURNACE BACK HERE!
NAVIGATOR OKAY, SKIPPER, EXCEPT FOR A SLIGHT SPLINTER WOUND IN THE LEG!

NOBODY ELSE ANSWERED... THEN THE NAVIGATOR'S VOICE CRACKLED OVER THE INTERCOM, ONCE MORE...
NAVIGATOR HERE! WIRELESS OPERATOR AND FRONT GUNNER ARE BOTH INJURED, SKIPPER. I'M SEEING TO THEM NOW!
GO AHEAD, NAVIGATOR! MID-UPPER, CAN YOU CHECK ON THE TAIL-GUNNER, PLEASE?

KNOWING THE CLOUDS SPELT SAFETY FROM FIGHTERS, MIKE UNPLUGGED HIS INTERCOM AND SLIPPED OUT OF THE TURRET. INSTANTLY, HE WAS MET BY A WAVE OF SEARING HEAT AND FLAME WHICH SENT HIM STAGGERING BACK... BUT ONLY FOR A MOMENT. GRITTING HIS TEETH, HE SNATCHED UP A FIRE EXTINGUISHER...
I'VE GOT TO REACH THE TAIL TURRET... SOMEHOW! POOR OLD TOM'LL BE ROASTED TO A CINDER IF I DON'T GET HIM OUT!


MIKE'S MEMORY FLASHED BACK TO THE TIME WHEN HE HAD BEEN IN A SIMILAR POSITION... TRAPPED AND HELPLESS IN THE TAIL TURRET OF A BLAZING BOMBER...
NEARLY THERE! JUST ONE... MORE SQUIRT!

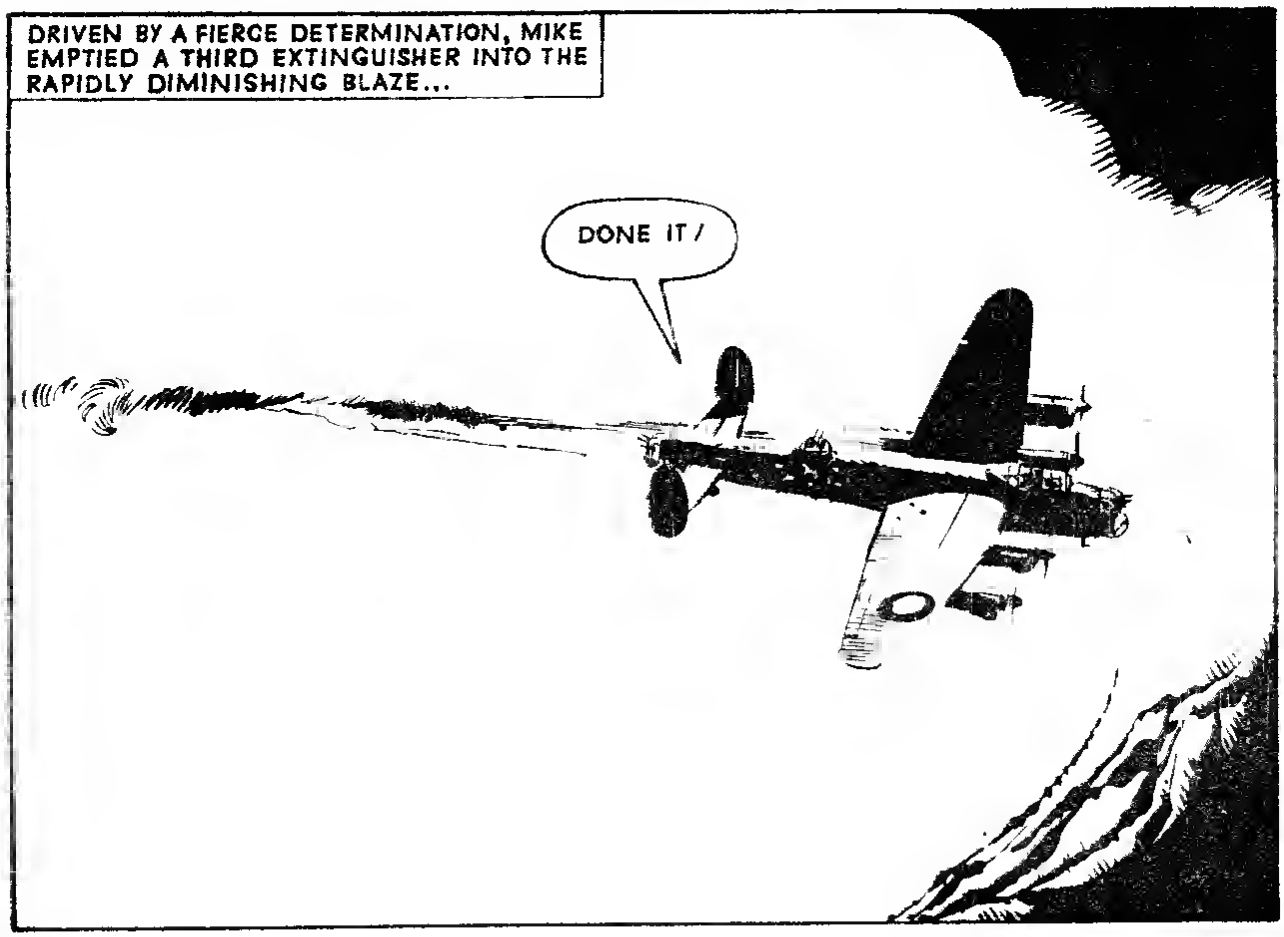
THROWING ASIDE THE EMPTY EXTINGUISHER, MIKE WRENCHED OPEN THE TAIL TURRET DOORS.

WITH SCORCHED AND BLISTERED FINGERS, MIKE TORE AT THE TAIL-GUNNER'S HARNESS. ALONG THE FUSELAGE THE FIRE STILL RAGED, FANNED BY THE DRAUGHT WHISTLING THROUGH COUNTLESS HOLES TORN IN THE GREAT BOMBER'S SIDES. . . .
GOT IT!

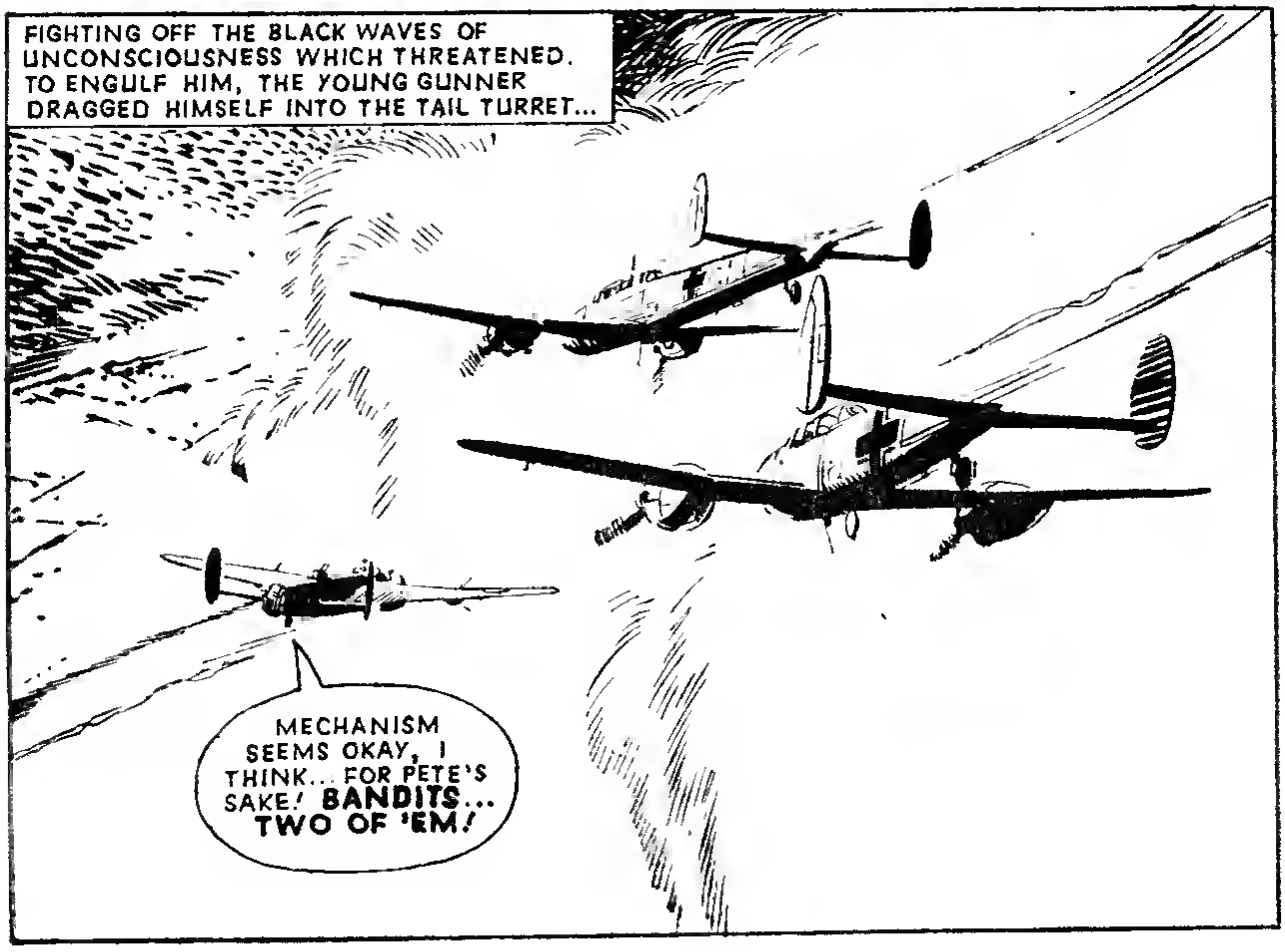
HIS FACE TWISTED WITH THE AGONISING PAIN OF HIS BURNS, MIKE DRAGGED THE TAIL-GUNNER BACK INTO THE MAIN BODY OF THE PLANE.
ANOTHER YARD . . . AND HE'LL BE OKAY!

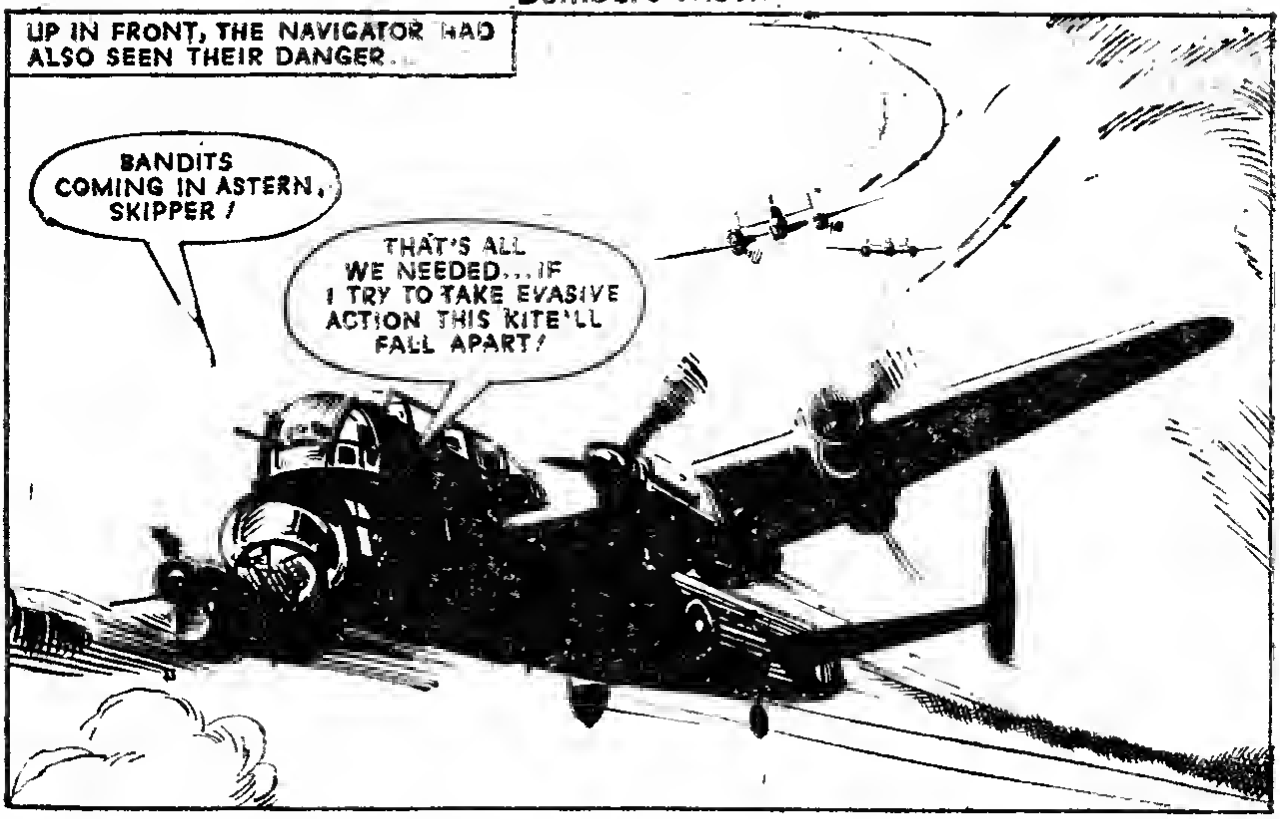
PANTING, ALMOST EXHAUSTED, MIKE LEFT THE GUNNER IN CHARGE OF THE NAVIGATOR AND SNATCHED UP A SECOND EXTINGUISHER . . .
MIKE! CAREFUL, MIKE!

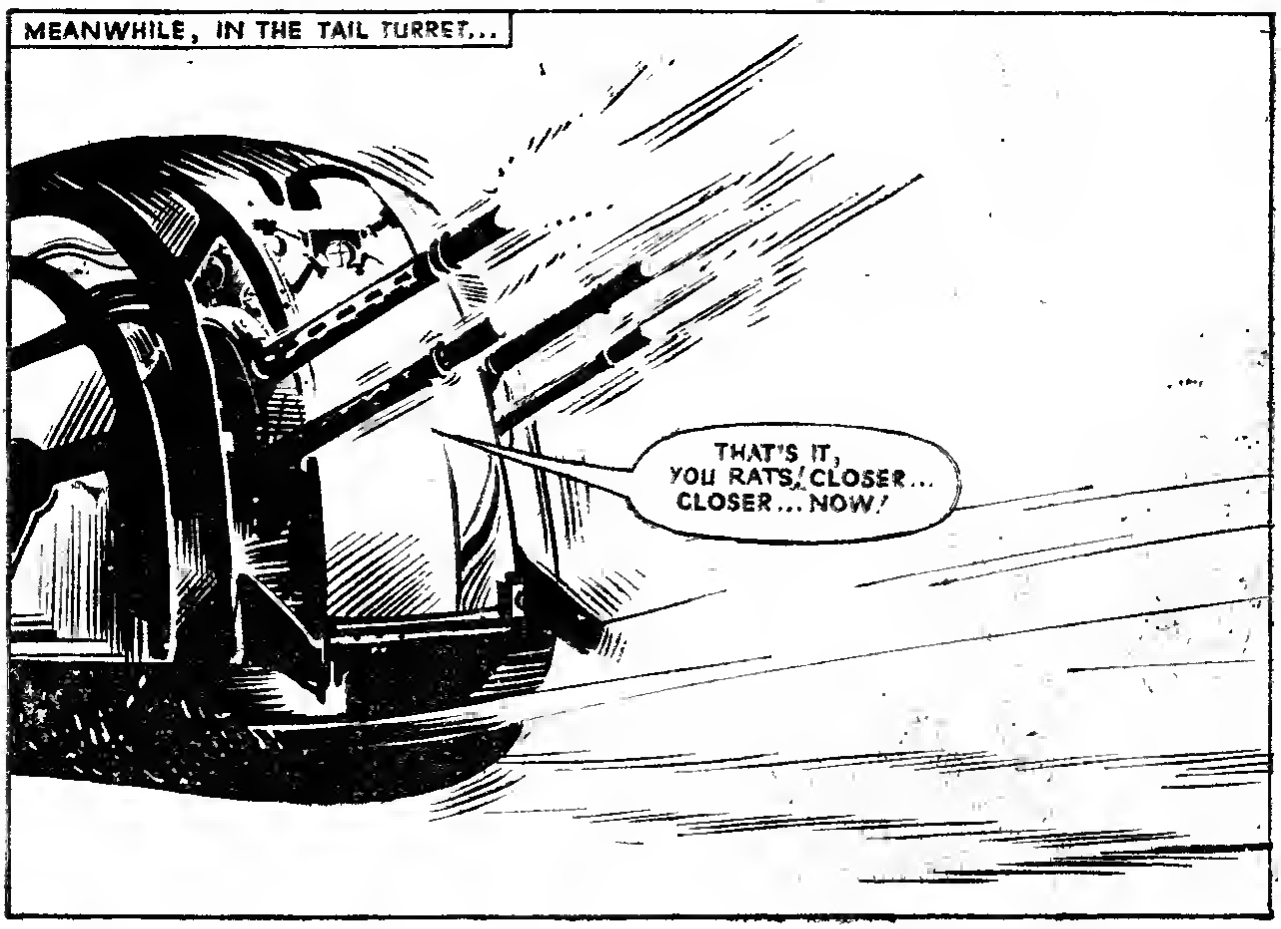
BUT THE YOUNG GUNNER PAID NO HEED. CARELESS OF THE FLAMES LICKING ROUND HIM, HE DIRECTED A STREAM OF FOAMING CHEMICAL AT THE SOURCE OF THE FIRE...
GOT TO... GET IT UNDER CONTROL...OR WE'RE FINISHED!


DRIVEN BY A FIERCE DETERMINATION, MIKE EMPTIED A THIRD EXTINGUISHER INTO THE RAPIDLY DIMINISHING BLAZE...
DONE IT!

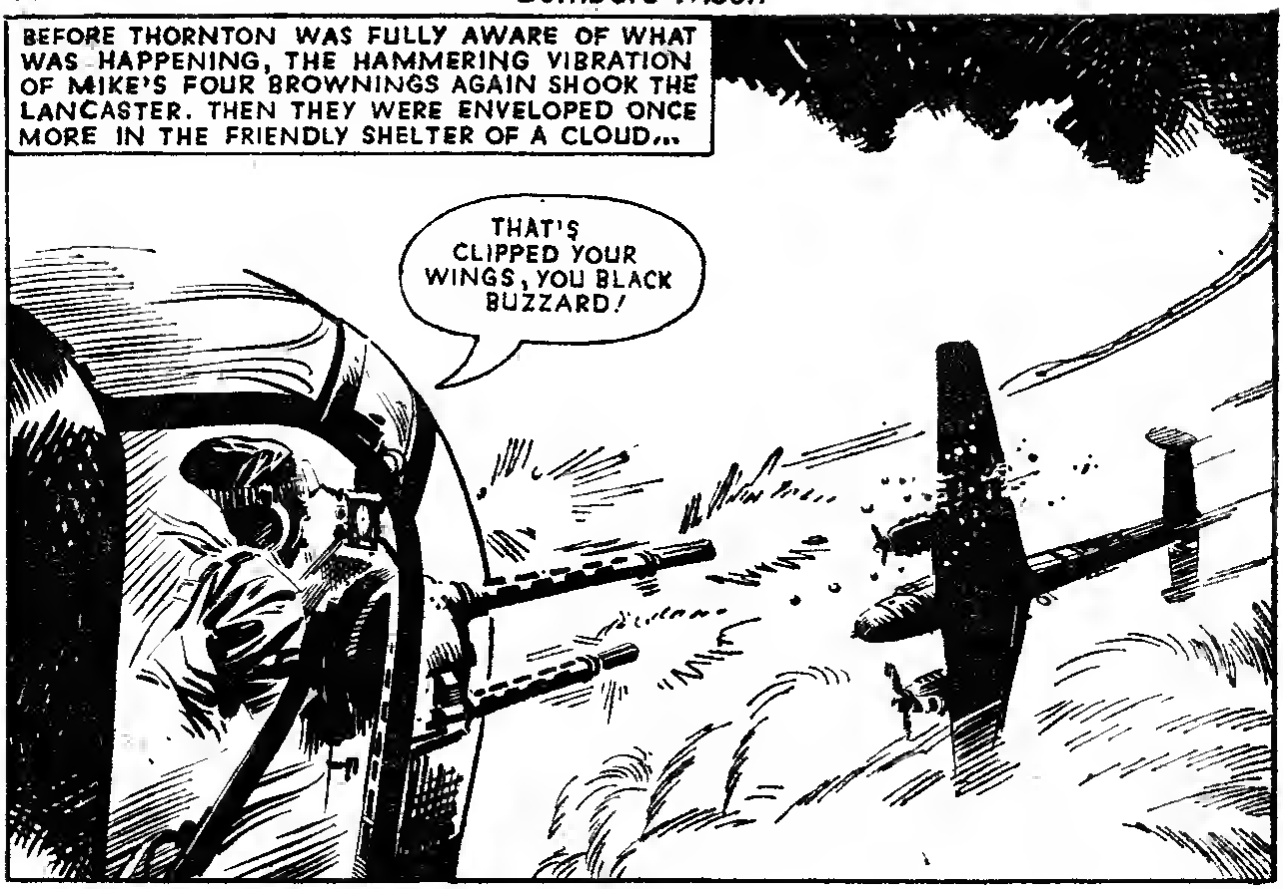
FOR A MOMENT MIKE SAGGED WEARILY AGAINST A SPLINTER-RIDDLED SPAR. THEN, SUDDENLY, HE ROUSED HIMSELF...
WE'RE COMING OUT OF THE CLOUDS! GOT TO GET THAT TURRET WORKING ... OR THE NIGHT FIGHTERS'LL GET US!

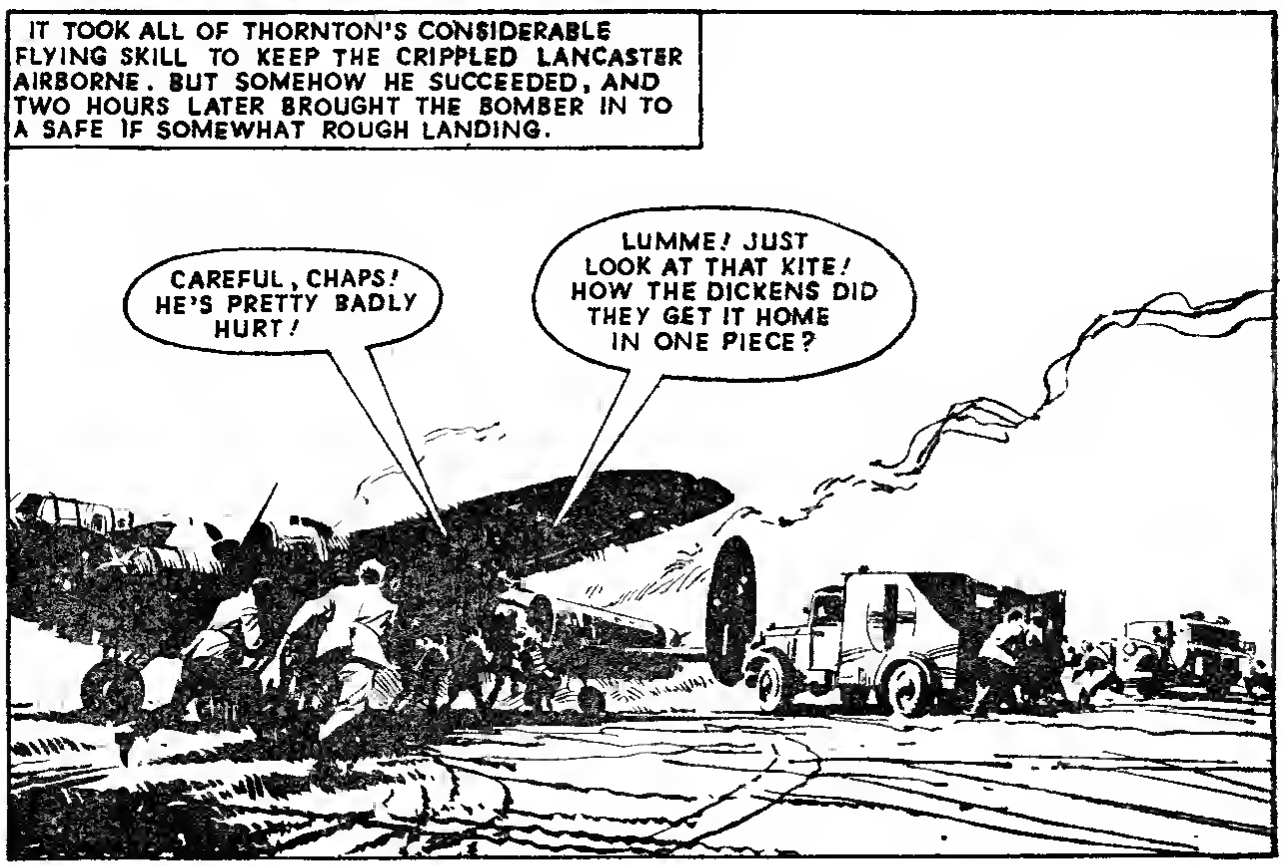

FIGHTING OFF THE BLACK WAVES OF UNCONSCIOUSNESS WHICH THREATENED TO ENGULF HIM, THE YOUNG GUNNER DRAGGED HIMSELF INTO THE TAIL TURRET...
MECHANISM SEEMS OKAY, I THINK... FOR PETE'S SAKE! BANDITS... TWO OF 'EM!


UP IN FRONT, THE NAVIGATOR HAD ALSO SEEN THEIR DANGER...
BANDITS COMING IN ASTERN, SKIPPER!
THAT'S ALL WE NEEDED... IF I TRY TO TAKE EVASIVE ACTION THIS KITE'LL FALL APART!


MEANWHILE, IN THE TAIL TURRET...
THAT'S IT, YOU RATS! CLOSER... CLOSER... NOW!

FOUR GLITTERING STREAMS OF LEAD STABBED AT THE LEADING MESSERSCHMITT. A HAIL OF TRACER RIPPED INTO ITS FUEL TANKS, AND IN ONE MOMENT, THE NIGHT SKY WAS TORN APART BY A BLINDING RED GLARE.
WHAT THE...!


BEFORE THORNTON WAS FULLY AWARE OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING, THE HAMMERING VIBRATION OF MIKE'S FOUR BROWNINGS AGAIN SHOOK THE LANCASTER. THEN THEY WERE ENVELOPED ONCE MORE IN THE FRIENDLY SHELTER OF A CLOUD...
THAT'S CLIPPED YOUR WINGS, YOU BLACK BUZZARD!


IT TOOK ALL OF THORNTON'S CONSIDERABLE FLYING SKILL TO KEEP THE CRIPPLED LANCASTER AIRBORNE. BUT SOMEHOW HE SUCCEEDED, AND TWO HOURS LATER BROUGHT THE BOMBER IN TO A SAFE IF SOMEWHAT ROUGH LANDING.
CAREFUL, CHAPS! HE'S PRETTY BADLY HURT!
LUMME! JUST LOOK AT THAT KITE! HOW THE DICKENS DID THEY GET IT HOME IN ONE PIECE?

THE LAST OF THE INJURED MEN HAD BEEN TRANSFERRED TO THE WAITING AMBULANCE WHEN THORNTON SUDDENLY REALISED THAT MIKE HAD NOT COME FORWARD. MAKING HIS WAY BACK ALONG THE SHATTERED FUSELAGE, HE WRENCHED OPEN THE TURRET DOORS...AND PAUSED, STARING IN HORROR AT THE SMOKE-BLACKENED FIGURE SLUMPED OVER THE GUNS...
MIKE! GOOD GLORY! LOOK AT THE STATE HE'S IN!
WE'D BETTER GET HIM OUT TO THE AMBULANCE... QUICK!

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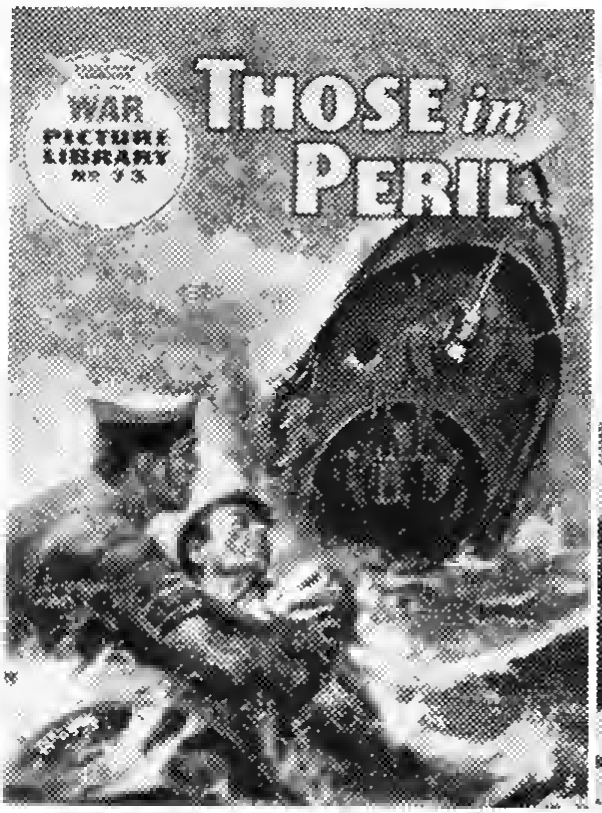

A fierce hatred burned in the heart of Dave Warren—a hatred of the Nazi wolves of the sea who mercilessly hunted down defenceless merchantmen.

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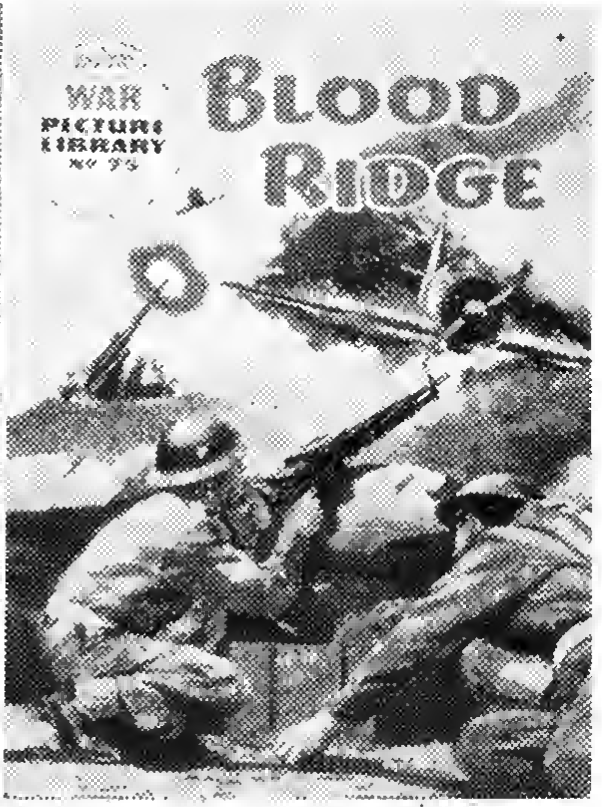

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